

Vanishing Act

by Nan Smith

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Summary: The birth of Lois and Clark's first child is sure to be a thrilling event. Especially when it coincides with an important investigation. This is the sequel to "Priorities".

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>by Nan Smith
Rated PG

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>

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the property of DC Comics, Warner Bros., December 3rd Productions,

>et. al., and no infringement of copyright is intended. The story is
strictly my idea, and is copyrighted to me.

>
Nan Smith

>
This story occurs shortly after "Priorities" in the time line of my

>Lois and Clark universe. I hope you enjoy it.

>Vanishing Act
by Nan Smith (deimos1@earthlink.net)

>

>Introduction

>A young woman hurried through the dimness of the parking lot.

>It was past sunset, and even the traces of pink had faded from the
sky. If not for the city lights the stars would be shining brightly,

>but as it was only a ghostly luminescence lit the sky. She glanced
at the glowing dial of her wristwatch; the time was six-thirty. She

>was going to have to hurry to arrive on time for her dinner
reservation.

>
The parking lot lights were too dim, and huge shadows loomed ahead of

>her on the path to the spot where she had parked her car. A little
chill of nervousness passed over her scalp as she started

resolutely

>toward the vehicle but she tried to ignore it. There was really no

danger, she knew. She'd been here after dark many times. Keys
in

>hand, she reached the car and inserted the correct key into the
door
lock.

>

>
"Dr. Klein, my due date was six days ago!" Lois Lane's voice had

>taken on a certain "edge" which tended to put others around her
on
the alert. "Just how much longer is this going to go on?"

>
The scientist sighed and cast an eloquent look at her husband

>standing silently behind her, hands in his pockets. He thought
he
had never seen the Man of Steel looking so...noncommittal.
Clark

>Kent's expression was extraordinarily blank, and he appeared to
be
focussing on a very ordinary photograph of two of Klein's
nephews on

>the opposite wall. Dr. Klein glanced out the window of his
office
and hoped the presence of two lab techs in the outer room
would

>preclude any explosions.

>"Lois," he began, "the main problem is that none of us know
the
actual length of a Kryptonian pregnancy. We assume it's
similar to a

>human's because the rate of development appears to be about the
same,
and...um...certain size limitations rather require that it
not go on

>much longer. All I can tell you is that every test I've been able
to
run says that things are fine, your baby is growing normally
and

>there's no sign of placental deterioration. In light of that,
I'm
really reluctant to interfere. All the physical indications
say that

>it will be soon. That's all I can tell you."

>Lois gave a long-suffering sigh. "And so...?"

>"So we wait," Dr. Klein said. "It won't be much longer, Lois."

>"For you," Lois said.

>"Believe me," Dr. Klein said, sincerely, "this has probably been
the
longest week of my life."

>

>
"Lois, he's right," Clark said as they left S.T.A.R. Labs. "It
can't

>be much longer. Maybe if you took the rest of the time off
you
wouldn't be so tired."

>
"If I did that I'd go completely crazy," Lois said. "Besides,

>chasing CJ in my current condition would probably tire me out
more.
I'll think about it after you bring your mom here, day after

>tomorrow."

>"Assuming nothing happens before then--"

>"Naturally," Lois said. She gave him a sour look. "Believe me,
if
it does, I won't be upset."

>
He grinned at her. "Ralph will be. He's still mad that Perry
won't

>partner him with me. Perry told him not a chance--he thinks it

would
cramp my style."

>
"It would."

>
Clark nodded in agreement. "Ralph's writing and mine just aren't

>complementary which I pointed out to Perry, and he agreed.

Sex
scandals aren't my line. I know Ralph is looking for the key to the

>big scoop but he's not going to get it my way."

>"That's for sure, and I don't mean because you're

you-know-who."
Lois sighed. "I guess I'm selfish. I just don't want to share you

>with anybody."

>Clark chuckled. "Don't worry, honey. Ralph's not my type."

>She made a face at him. "So, who *are* you being partnered with?"

>"No one, so far as I know. Perry said he thought I'd do better alone
until you get back, rather than wasting my time breaking in a new

>partner."

>"Perry's so smart it scares me sometimes."

>"Yeah, me too." Clark looked uncharacteristically solemn.

"I
sometimes wonder..." He broke off.

>
"What?"

>
"Nothing." He opened the door of the Jeep for her. "Well, back to

>the salt mines, I guess."

>*****

>When the elevator deposited them on their floor the first thing that
greeted Lois's ears was a resentful mutter from Ralph.

"Aren't you

>*ever* gonna have that kid, Lane?"

>She gave him a look that would have melted lead. "Believe me, Ralph,
you can't possibly be in more of a hurry than I am."

>
"Kent!" Perry emerged from his office. "Get on over to City Hall.

>There's a demonstration goin' on over the Council's new zoning
proposals. Better take a photographer."

>
"Right, Chief. Jimmy, let's go!" He gave Lois a quick peck on the

>cheek and reversed course toward the elevator.

>Jimmy passed Lois on his way up the ramp. "There's three messages
from your mom on your desk."

>
"Great."

>
The messages from her mother lay prominently on the desk's surface,

>but before she had the opportunity to read them her phone rang. She
picked up the receiver. "Lois Lane."

>
"Lois, thank heavens!" Ellen Lane's voice said. "I've been trying to

>reach you for ages!"

>"I was at my doctor's," Lois said. "Is something wrong?"

>"Lucy's disappeared," her mother said.

>"What do you mean 'disappeared'?"

>"I mean she's disappeared!" Ellen's voice rose slightly.

"She
didn't meet me for dinner last night, and no one knows what's

>happened to her!"

>Lois took a deep breath. "All right, Mother, why don't you start
from the beginning?" she suggested. "Why do you think she's

>disappeared?"

>There was a short pause on the other end of the line. "Lucy and I
were supposed to have dinner together last night at Marcel's--we had

>a seven o'clock dinner reservation," her mother told her. "She never
showed up."

>
"Well, maybe..."

>
"I called her dorm," Ellen continued. "One of her roommates told me

>she left at six-fifteen to meet me for dinner. I eventually gave up,
but this morning I called her--I talked to another girl. Lucy never

>came back."

>"What?"

>"She didn't come back," Ellen repeated. "But her car is still there.
They checked for me. I called the police, but they won't do anything

>until a person has been missing for 48 hours."

>"Have you called the dorm back since this morning?" Lois asked
patiently. "Maybe she's shown up by now."

>
"I called twice more, the last time just fifteen minutes ago. She

>hasn't come back, Lois. Something's happened to her. I can feel it."

>"Okay." Lois sighed. Her scatterbrained sister was going to drive
Ellen into an early grave yet, as her mother was so fond of telling

>her. "Let me make some calls and see what I can find out."

>*****

>"She never came back, Ms. Lane," Carol Jennings was telling her over
the phone an hour later. The girl was the eldest of Lucy's

>roommates, the first to return from class and receive Lois's message.
"She had a big exam today, too. She said she'd be back by ten

>because she had to cram for it."

>"And you say her car is still there?"

>"It's in the student lot. I checked for your mom this morning, and
it was still there when I got back a few minutes ago. She doesn't

>usually do this. She's supposed to graduate this spring, you know,
and she's really been working."

>
Presented with a completely at odds picture for her flighty sister,

>Lois was silent for several seconds. "So, what do you think
happened?" she asked finally.

>
Carol hesitated. "I don't know," she said. "But I'm just a little

>worried."

>*****

>"So, I called the police, but they told me the policy was to wait 48
hours," Lois said, in disgust. "They wouldn't do a thing."

>
"Well..." Clark tilted his desk chair back. "I guess to them she's

>just one more statistic. They get lots of missing person reports

and
most often the person shows up again on their own."

>
"But," Lois pointed out, "if they don't show up, the trail has gotten

>cold."

>He nodded. "I know. In a city this size, there aren't any ideal
solutions."

>
"Yeah. Well, I got hold of Bobby and promised him dinner at Sven's

>Smorgasbord if he could find out anything. He said he'd try."

>"That's a good idea." Clark looked at his wife's worried face.

Lois
was more upset about this than she wanted him to know. He dropped

>his feet to the floor and stood up. "I'm going to fly over and take
a look around her car. She still drives that old Dodge, doesn't she?"

>
"Last I heard." She looked relieved. "Thanks, Clark."

>
He dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "No problem. Back in a

>jiff." He headed for the ramp.

>Behind him, he heard the now familiar rush of Ralph's footsteps. The
man still hadn't given up, apparently. Clark increased his pace

>and went through the door to the stairs while Ralph was still
hurrying up the ramp. A second later he was launching himself from

>the roof of the Daily Planet.

>*****

>Superman spotted the familiar car from the air and a moment later was
touching down lightly in the student parking lot.

>
Lucy's car had been sitting there for some time, judging by the light

>coating of dust visible to his enhanced vision. He scanned it from
front to back, then leaned forward to examine the driver's door more

>closely.

>The tip of a key was broken off in the lock.

>He frowned thoughtfully, then turned to look around the entire area.
Nothing. No, wait, what was that? He strode to the front of Lucy's

>car. There, tangled in the lower branches of the hedge was a
crumpled, white handkerchief.

>
Clark scanned it closely. The cloth was linen, edged with what

>looked like actual hand stitching, and it hadn't been here long. He
leaned closer and sniffed. It was faintly scented with some kind of

>expensive cologne. Slowly he inhaled, memorizing the smell until he
was sure he would recognize it if he encountered it again, then he

>turned and glanced carefully around the area once more to be certain
there were no observers. Quickly he transformed into Clark Kent,

>carefully and delicately disentangled the handkerchief from the
branches, tucked it into the pocket of his coat, and left the parking

>lot.

>*****

>"So, I visited Lost and Found," Clark was explaining some time later.
"I asked if anyone had turned in a key ring that had a broken car key
>on it."

>"Had they?" Lois asked, tensely.

>He withdrew it from his pocket. "Do you recognize it?"

>Lois examined it, she shrugged. "It's a key ring. But this key is
for the music box I gave her when I went off to college."

>
"So it's Lucy's?"
>
She nodded.
>
He rested a hand on her shoulder. "All right, I think Superman

>should pay a visit to Bill Henderson. Maybe it'll speed things up a
bit. This is more evidence than just her disappearance."

>
"Do you think the handkerchief means anything?" she asked.

>
"Well, it was stuck in the hedge right near the car. I probably

>should have left it there, but if it's evidence it could have
disappeared when I left."
>
"Yeah." Lois grimaced.
>
"Are you all right?"
>
She made a face. "Just more Braxton-Hicks contractions. The darn

>things are making my muscles sore, they're so hard now."

>"You're sure that's all it is?" he asked.

>"Yeah, I'm sure." She rubbed her lower back with one fist.
"Of
course, now would be the worst possible time to go into labor, when
>my sister's probably been kidnapped."

>"Just be sure to let me know if you do! I'll be back in a little while."

>"Where are you going now, Kent?" Ralph's voice said in his ear.

>Clark glanced at the other man in mild annoyance. "Police station,
Ralph. It's personal business."
>
"Mind if I tag along?"
>
"As a matter of fact, I do," Clark said, coolly. "Excuse me." He

>turned away and headed for the ramp. Ralph followed.

>"Come on, Kent, give a guy a break! You're always running off and
coming in with great scoops. What's your secret?"

>
"Being in the right place at the right time," Clark said. "And a lot
>of hard, investigative work." He ascended the ramp and paused before
the elevator. Ralph pressed the button. The doors opened a moment
>later and the two men boarded. As the doors started to shut, Clark
stepped quickly backward. "Oops, forgot something."

>
"Hey!" Ralph protested, belatedly, but the doors were already

>closing. Clark turned and opened the door to the stairs. A second
later there was a distant, but characteristic, sonic boom.

>

>
Perry White, across the office, had witnessed the whole event.

He

>smiled for a second, then shook his head. Ralph had clearly not
given up his hope of discovering Clark Kent's knack for nailing the

>big scoops. If the boy couldn't find some way to discourage his
persistent colleague's determined pursuit Perry was afraid he might

>have to step in, but he hoped he wouldn't have to. Clark and Lois
were usually pretty inventive about things like this, but they

>clearly had other matters on their minds right now.

>And, of course, Ralph's nuisance factor could very well interfere
with the Daily Planet's profit margins if he became too troublesome.

>
The elevator doors opened; Ralph emerged, looking chagrined.

"Where'd he

>go?"

>No one answered.

>Perry grinned suddenly to himself as he made a decision.

Whatever
story they were following now, Lois and Clark had enough to deal with

>without Ralph dogging every step they took.

>"Ralph!" he barked.

>Ralph's head swiveled toward him, guilt written in every line of his
expression. "Yeah, Chief?"

>
"Where's that stuff you were gonna give me about those two city

>councilmen and the red light district?"

>"Oh..." Ralph hurried down the ramp. "Uh, I don't have anything
concrete on that yet, Chief."

>
"Well, then, what are you doin' messing around in here? Get busy and

>find me some evidence one way or the other, or you're fired!"

>"Right away, Chief!" Ralph scurried to his desk, grabbed his
recorder, and was on his way out of the newsroom in less than a

>minute.

>*****

>When Clark Kent arrived home just after four o'clock, he found his
household very quiet. The reason soon became obvious; his wife was

>sound asleep on the living room sofa, and upstairs he could hear the
faint noises that told him his eleven-month-old son was just waking

>up from his afternoon nap.

>He flew quietly up the stairs to take the little boy from his crib.
CJ blinked sleepily at him with his big, brown, almond-shaped eyes

>and held out his arms. Clark picked him up.

>"Hey there, pal. You look like you could use a change." He swung
the baby neatly into one arm. "Come on. We're gonna be real quiet

>so we don't wake Mommy up, okay?"

>When Lois wandered into the kitchen about five, drawn by the
delectable smells wafting into the living room, it was to find her

>husband, clad in jeans and a black T-shirt, cooking dinner while
their son played happily with several kitchen utensils in

the middle
>of the floor.

>"Hi, honey," he greeted her. "Dinner will be ready in a few minutes.
Have a good nap?"
>
"Mm." She tilted her face up for a kiss. "Smells great. What's on the
>menu?"

>"Pasta with clam sauce," Clark said.

>"Sounds wonderful. I'm famished," she said. "So, what happened at
police headquarters?"
>
"Why don't you sit down over there while I set the table, and I'll tell
>you."

>"I'm only too happy to," Lois said. She sat down and put her feet up
on another kitchen chair. "Having the dimensions of a small whale
>does have its advantages. So," she continued, returning to the
subject, "about Lucy?"
>
"I talked to Henderson, told him what you found out and how Clark
>found the key and the handkerchief, and he agreed it didn't look
good. He's listed her as officially missing."
>
"And what are they going to do about it?"
>
"They're going to investigate. They've already gone over her car

>pretty thoroughly, as of this afternoon. It turns out that they were
already investigating, though."
>
"What do you mean?"
>
"It seems that Lucy isn't the first young woman who's vanished this way."
>
Lois swallowed. "How many?"
>
He removed plates from the cupboard and glanced soberly at her. "Six
>others in the last two months."

>"Six!"

>Clark nodded. "Six. Seven, now."

>"Have any of them...turned up?"

>He didn't mistake her meaning. "No. No bodies. They just left
their dorms in the evening and never came back."

>
"Didn't anybody report it?"
>
He nodded. "Yeah. But none of them have family in the area, so

>nobody noticed at first except their roommates, and they apparently
assumed the missing women were playing hooky. No one reported the
>first one missing for over a week."

>"That's awful! But Lucy has family in the area--" Lois stopped.

>"But she never talks about us, huh?" Clark raised an eyebrow.
"Maybe she doesn't want anyone to know about her notorious sister and
>brother-in-law." He finished setting the table and picked up CJ to
put him in his high chair. "Here you go. How about chicken sticks
>for an entree tonight, sir? With a side of delicious peas and cooked
carrots, and tapioca pudding for dessert?"
>
CJ squirmed around as Clark strapped him into his chair, and reached
>for the chicken sticks as soon as Clark set them on his tray.

>"Good appetite there," Clark said. "Mom always said I was
a
bottomless pit at his age."
>
"You still are," Lois said. "I guess Lucy doesn't talk about her
>family. I mean, her roommates knew we lived around here, but
she
didn't tell them much. Carol Jennings, this morning, was
surprised
>when she found out I was Lucy's sister."

>"Sort of like you when we first met."

>"Yeah, I guess."

>"So," Clark said, "most people didn't know she had relatives
nearby.
I guess that fits the pattern, then."
>
"Did they have any other leads?"
>
Clark shook his head. "Only that they've all disappeared from
the
>campus. And that the police are investigating."

>*****

>Two hours later, they were seated together on the living room
sofa.
CJ was showing definite signs of fatigue, even though his
afternoon
>nap had been later than usual, and the television was muttering
away
in the background although neither of them was giving it much
>attention. Lois, leaning comfortably against her husband's
side,
scraped the last dregs of chocolate ice cream from the bowl
in her
>lap.

>"Done?" Clark asked.

>"Well, the bowl's empty," Lois said. "Is there any more?"

>Clark shook his head. "I'm afraid that was the last of it.
You've
been going through it like crazy for the last couple of
days. I can
>go down to Lupe's and pick up some more. It'll only take a
minute--"
He sat up suddenly. "Oh, oh."
>
"What?" Lois asked.
>
"Big fire in Suicide Slum. Three buildings. Could be that
arsonist
>again." He stood up. "I guess the ice cream will have to wait."

>Lois sighed. "Be careful."

>"Of course." He spun into Superman, gave her a kiss and was
gone.

>Lois glanced wistfully at the empty bowl, then picked up the
remote
control and turned up the sound. The sports scores weren't
>particularly interesting so she flicked over the channels to one
of
the other local stations.
>
They had discussed the disappearance of the women from NTSU's
campus
>until there seemed to be no angle they hadn't covered, but they
were
no wiser than before they started. The only thing they had
been able
>to decide was that they would concentrate on the case the next day
to
the exclusion of other stories, barring the occasional Superman
>rescue. Surely, they would be able to turn up some sort
of
information. And Bobby Bigmouth was definitely getting another

call

>first thing in the morning, if he didn't get back to them any sooner.

>The news channel was in the middle of a commercial break. After a
dissertation over the natural color that could be achieved by the

>simple application of the advertised product to the hair, and the
inability of the male of the species to discern the difference, the

>news came back on, showing the current breaking story of the huge
fire in Suicide Slum; fire fighters in protective gear swarmed around

>in the background, where behind them the fire raged, wholly engulfing
three buildings and threatening a fourth. The newscaster exclaimed

>in what seemed to Lois to be less than genuine horror at the sight.
Behind her, an unidentified spectator hurled an audible curse at the

>police officer attempting to move the inevitable crowd of spectators
back to a safer distance.

>
A familiar red and blue figure flashed across the sky as she watched

>and the cameras focussed on Superman as he came to rest by the fire
chief. They seemed to confer for a moment, then Superman launched

>himself upward and vanished into one of the upper windows of the
middle building. The camera again focussed on the newscaster and

>then shifted to Police Chief Harrelson, who was discussing the
possibility of arson and the job the arson team would be doing after

>the immediate emergency was taken care of.

>Lois looked back at her bowl. She really wanted more chocolate ice
cream. It seemed as if she couldn't get enough of it the last few

>days.

>The news shifted to a report from Fostonia where the government
spokesman was vigorously denying allegations of government coverups

>regarding rumors of a thriving white slave trade operating in the
country. Lois gave an unladylike snort. That sounded like something

>Ralph could really sink his teeth into.

>She glanced unhappily at the bowl again. She really wished Clark had
the time to pick up another gallon of ultra choco-chocolate monster

>chip ice cream before he'd taken off.

>The news subject changed again, to a trade dispute between Upper and
Lower Tanzanika, and she wondered idly how their friend the King was

>doing. The last letter from Bobbo had been upbeat and cheerful, but
reflected his frustrations in dealing with some of the stone age

>customs with which his countrymen seemed completely enamored, and
which made the reforms he was attempting to enact so difficult to

>actually get into place.

>Lois abruptly shut off the television and hoisted herself to her
feet. It was only a ten-minute drive to Lupe's Market. There was no

>reason she couldn't go get the ice cream herself.

>"Come on, sweetheart," she said to CJ. "Let's go for a ride."

>"Da!" CJ announced. He loved car rides, although why Lois had no
idea, as he always fell asleep within the first couple of minutes.
>
She took his hand, helped him to climb onto the sofa so she could
>pick him up without bending, and a few moments later they were in the
Jeep and headed for the market.
>

>
The parking lot behind the little corner market which Lois and Clark
>preferred was well lighted, and several other cars were parked there
as well. One of the many things that made this market one of her
>favorites was the presence of a police station half a block away, and
the resultant high visibility of Metropolis's finest in the area.
>The employees of the store knew both Lois and her husband and Lupe,
the grandmotherly lady who actually owned Lupe's Market admitted
>frankly that she had a crush on Clark. Since CJ's arrival, the crush
had extended to him, whom Lupe described as "un nino muy guapo",
>which Clark translated as meaning "a very handsome little boy".
Considering her knowledge of how CJ would look as a grown man, Lois
>could only agree.

>When she approached the checkout counter, Juanito, Lupe's six-foot
grandson, raised his dark eyebrows at the sight of the five
>half-gallons of different kinds of chocolate ice cream and the large
jar of fudge sauce. He grinned. "You must have run out again," he
>commented. "Mom used to say just before one of us was ready she'd go
on a chocolate binge, too. I think I'll put my bet in the pool
>tonight."

>"I hope you're right," Lois said, fervently, as he began to ring up
the purchases. "We're already a week overdue."
>
"I figure tomorrow or the next day." Juanito flashed a white-toothed
>grin. "Tell Clark he has to let us know."

>"I will," Lois said.

>Juanito stacked the ice cream in the Styrofoam chest Lois had brought
along, then gave a sharp whistle. "Hey, Enrique!"
>His younger brother emerged from the storeroom. "You want me?"

>"Yeah. Carry this stuff to the car for Ms. Lane, okay?"

>The teenager nodded and grinned a neat twin of his brother's smile.
"Sure thing." He sauntered over to the cash register and picked up
>the chest. "Hi there, kid," he said to CJ.

>CJ babbled something unintelligible and waved both arms. Lois
followed Enrique from the store after bidding his brother goodbye.
>The Sanchez family had run this market since well before Lois had
started coming here seven years ago, and the way they treated her was

>another reason she continued to come here, in spite of the fact that
their selection wasn't as wide as that of the supermarket farther

>downtown.

>Enrique stowed the chest in the back of the Kent Jeep while Lois was
fastening CJ into the safety seat, bade her a cheerful good evening

>and headed back for the store with a modest tip in his pocket.

Lois
got behind the wheel of the Jeep, started the engine and turned on

>her headlights.

>She had just pulled out onto the side street when she heard the woman's
scream.

>
It came from the alley that opened directly ahead and to her left.

>Lois rolled up her window, pulled up to the alley and turned the Jeep
so that the headlights illuminated the narrow passage.

>
Three struggling figures were caught in the light: two male and one

>female. There was no time for more than a general impression, for as
the Jeep's headlights flashed over the three, one of the men raised

>an arm, gripping a knife in his fist, and brought it down.

>The woman's second scream was cut off in the middle as she fell, and
the two men swiveled around to see who had intruded. For an instant

>the tableau froze.

>With a yell, the knife wielder started toward Lois and she had a
clear look at his face. The handle of the knife struck the driver's

>window. The glass quivered, but didn't break.

>Lois slammed the Jeep into reverse and floored the accelerator.

The
bumper caught the mugger's hip, knocking him sideways and she shoved

>the heel of her hand down on the horn.

>The other man grasped his fallen companion by one arm, dragging him
to his feet and, from what she could see of his face, shouting at

>him. Both men ran in the opposite direction, the one whom she had
struck limping markedly.

>
With a gust of wind, Superman landed beside the Jeep. "What's the matter?"

>
Lois pointed. "She was stabbed!"

>
Instantly, Clark was beside the fallen woman. He scooped her up.

>"Wait here!" Then he was gone, in a flash of red and blue.

>*****

>"Superman took her to the hospital," Lois concluded to the young
officer who was taking her statement. A second cop was examining the

>ominous pool of blood on the pavement ten feet ahead of the Jeep. CJ
fussed unhappily in the rear seat.

>
"You're sure you saw their faces?" the officer asked, doubtfully.

>
"Yes, how many times do I have to tell you? I saw one from a

>distance and the guy with the knife up close...just inches

away,"
Lois said, impatiently.
>
The officer looked thoughtfully at her expanded middle. "Would you
>recognize them if you saw them again?"

>Lois nodded vigorously. "You bet I would. I could paint their
pictures for you--if I could paint." She rubbed her back.
"Do you
>mind if I sit back down, officer? My back and feet don't like this
very much."
>
"Sure, go ahead..." He broke off as Superman touched down next to the
>Jeep.

>"Officer." Superman greeted him pleasantly and turned instantly to
his wife. "Are you all right, Lois?"
>
"Yeah, fine, except that my groceries are melting while I'm standing
>here talking," she said, acidly. "Officer Atkins here doesn't seem
to believe I saw what I saw." A little of the shock had begun to
>wear off, leaving irritation in its wake.

>A shadow of a grin twitched his lips, then he turned to the police
officer. "If Ms. Lane said she saw the woman stabbed, then that's
>what she saw," he said. "Do you need her any more?"

>"I'm afraid so," the man said. "If she saw the crime committed, and
the face of the killer..."
>
"Not yet," Superman interjected. "The victim's still alive. I took
>her to Metro General's emergency room."

>"Still, Ms. Lane claims she saw their faces. We'll need as thorough
a description as possible--and there's a police artist on duty
>tonight."

>Superman glanced at Lois. "All right. May I speak to Ms. Lane privately?"

>"Sure." The man moved away to confer with his companion.

>Clark opened the Jeep door for Lois and leaned toward her. "Why
don't you drive over there with CJ, Lois," he suggested, sounding
>amused. "I'll take the ice cream home, put it away and meet you at
the station."
>

>
An hour of meticulous description and exasperated outbursts later,
>Lois rubbed her eyes.

>"To think," she said, "that all I wanted was to get a half gallon of
ice cream." She winced slightly and put a hand to her middle.

>"Ouch."

>Clark glanced nervously at her. "Are you sure you're okay? That's
the second of those in forty-five minutes."
>
"I suppose you've been counting?" she asked.
>
He nodded.
>
Superman had arrived, given his statement and left shortly

>afterwards. Ten minutes later, Clark Kent had turned up, looking for
his wife. Now he glanced across the room to where a pair of female
>officers were entertaining an increasingly sleepy CJ, then at

the
police artist. "Is she done?"
>
The man nodded. "I think so."
>
Clark turned to give Lois a hand out of the chair. "In that case, I
>think we'll go home." He accepted his son from one of the women.
"Thank you."
>
"He certainly looks like you, Mr. Kent," Officer Anderson remarked.
>"How old is he?"
>"Eleven months," Clark said. "Come on, buddy, let's take Mommy home.
I think she's had enough for one evening."
>
As they left, his super-hearing caught a remark by Officer Anderson
>and he felt himself flush. Lois noticed.
>"What?"
>"Nothing."
>"Clark, you're blushing."
>He shrugged uncomfortably. "Anderson said something about me not
wasting any time."
>
"Huh?"
>
"With CJ eleven months old, and you obviously..."
>
"Oh." Lois chuckled softly. "Well, at least you're getting a good
>reputation."
>"Lo-is!"
>She giggled and then winced. "Ow."
>"Are you okay?"
>She glanced down at her rounded abdomen. "Yeah. That hurt a little."
>"Was it a contraction?"
>She hesitated. "I'm not sure."
>"You suppose this could be 'it'?"
>"Maybe. Or it could just be false labor again."
>Clark swallowed, surprised to discover that he was nervous. True, as
Superman he had helped deliver a number of babies, but it had never
>been *his* baby, or *his* wife before.
>"Well," he said, "I guess we'll just have to wait and see, huh?"
>She looked nervously up at him. "I guess so."
>An hour later she'd had two more contractions, but an hour after that
there had been only one, and by one a.m. it was obvious that they were
>becoming farther and farther apart.
>Lois was almost in tears. Clark sighed. "Another dry run."
>"Oh, Clark, I know I'm going to be pregnant forever!" she wailed.
>He put his arms around her. "Remember what they said in childbirth
classes, honey. It's your body's way of practicing for the real
>thing. It means it's getting close."
>"Everyone's been saying that for the last two weeks," Lois said,
crossly. "It's never going to happen! Maybe Kryptonian pregnancies
>last for a couple of years, like elephants, or something. Who knows
how long this could go on?"
>
>He tried to look sympathetic, but the last statement was too much and
a chuckle escaped. Lois glared at him. "I suppose you think

it's
>funny!"

>"No," he denied, shaking his head. "Not really. It's just when
you
say things like that--"
>
She sighed. "I know you're right, Clark, but it seems like
forever!"
>
"I know," he said, sympathetically. "And I know how
uncomfortable
>you are, or I'd suggest a fun way they told us about to try
to
stimulate labor. But really, it can't go on much longer,
honey." He
>dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "Can I get you some
ice
cream?"
>
Lois brightened. "That really does sound good. With fudge
sauce."
>
"How did I know you were going to say that?"
>
"Well, Kryptonians *are* telepathic, or so I'm told. And after
I've
>finished the ice cream, we can talk about stimulating labor.
You
know, I'd put up with just about any--um--inconvenience if I
thought
>it might hurry things along a bit..."

>*****

>"Hey, Lane!" Ralph said as they emerged from the elevator at
nine
o'clock the next morning. "We all thought for sure this was
it!" He
>unwisely reached out to pat her on the tummy. "When are you going
to
have that kid, anyhow?"
>
If looks could have killed, the one Lois turned on him would
have
>left him stretched lifeless upon the ground. Clark answered
him.
"When it's ready. But if you want to live to see it, I'd move
that
>hand, if I were you."

>Ralph hastily pulled back his hand. Perry White, who had been
a
silent observer to the minor drama, now spoke up. "What
happened,
>Clark?"

>Clark sighed. "We were up late with false labor."

>"Oh." Perry nodded, sagely. "Yeah, I remember that. Alice had
it
most of the last month with our first. Hang in there, kids;
it'll
>happen pretty soon. Now, any more information on that mugging
last
night?"
>
"Not yet, Chief," Clark said. "We're going to give them a call
in a
>few minutes." He took Lois's coat, hung it on the rack for her,
and
went to his desk. After a moment, he made a trip to the coffee

>machine and returned with a chocolate frosted doughnut for his
wife.
Lois took it and glanced up at him with a smile. "Thanks,
honey.
>You don't really have to be so nice to me, you know."

>"Yes, I do," he said in her ear. "I got you into this."

>"I seem to recall I wasn't exactly objecting," she said. "But
thanks
for the doughnut."
>
He chuckled softly. "I guess you're feeling better this morning,
then?"
>
She nodded and smiled around the mouthful of chocolate doughnut.

>"Your therapy was pretty effective."

>"Any time," he said. "I'm going to make that call to my
contact,
now. Let's see if they've found out who the victim was."

>
Five minutes later he returned to Lois's desk. "I got an update
on
>the stabbing," he said. "The victim was Mary Brett. *Detective*
Mary
Brett. She's one of Henderson's people."
>
"A police detective?"
>
Clark nodded. "She was due to report in day before yesterday,
but
>didn't, then she showed up last night--and you saved her life."

>"What was she doing there--does anyone know?"

>Clark shook his head. "Marv didn't know, or wouldn't say. He
did
say she's in critical condition, but they think she'll make
it.
>Henderson is livid, though."

>"I'll bet."

>"Lois! Clark!" Perry's voice reverberated over the noise of
the
busy newsroom. "In my office, now!"
>
Clark gave his wife a hand out of her chair and together they
went
>into their boss's office. He gestured them to chairs.

>"I just got a call from Bill Henderson. He wants us to hold
any
follow-ups on the stabbing story from last night, Lois."

>
"Why am I not surprised?" Lois asked rhetorically.
>
"Does it have anything to do with the victim being a police
officer,
>Chief?" Clark asked.

>Perry raised an eyebrow at him. "How'd you know that? No,
never
mind. Yeah. She was involved in a pretty sensitive case, and

>Henderson thinks her cover was somehow blown. She's been able
to
tell them a little--apparently she was trying to make it to a
police
>station when the bad guys caught up with her. Henderson says
he
wants them to think she's dead--that their operation is still
safe."
>
"What was the investigation?" Lois asked.
>
"He wouldn't say. He did say he owed you one, though."

>
"That's a lot of help," Lois grumbled.
>
"So we kill the story?" Clark asked.
>
"No, we just sit on it for awhile. Henderson promised the Planet
an
>exclusive if it pans out. I guess it's his way of saying thanks
to
Lois."
>
Lois looked somewhat mollified. "I guess that's fair. Kind of.
It
>wasn't that big a story the way it was, anyhow."

>"My view exactly," Perry said.

>Clark nodded. "Okay, I guess we do it his way. Uh, Chief, Lois
and
I wanted to tell you we've got a lead on another story right
now.
>Unless you really need us, we're going to be busy for the rest of
the
day."
>
Perry raised an eyebrow. "Anything you want to tell me about?"

>
They looked at each other. "Um," Clark said, "well, it involves
a
>series of unexplained disappearances of co-eds from NTSU. Seven
in
the last two months, and the last one was night before last.

>Superman found some evidence of kidnapping, yesterday."

>"Say no more," Perry waved his hands at them. "Get going! Just
be
sure you bring me back a story!"

>

>
"Sure," Bobby said. His voice sounded muffled as if he was
speaking

>through a mouthful of food. "I was gonna phone you right
after
lunch. I did some askin' around after you called me
yesterday.

>There's a bunch of guys, see, who moved in two, three months
ago.
They were operating down south, but things got too hot for
'em."

>
"And?" Lois said.

>
"Sheesh! Have some patience! The rumor is that they were
grabbin'

>girls from the local college--good families and all, but no
relatives
nearby so they wouldn't get noticed too soon. That's all
I know,

>except these guys are dangerous. There's big money involved.
They
mighta grabbed your sister."

>
"Any idea what they want them for?" Lois asked.

>
"Not a word. They want 'em alive, but they're not above killing

>anybody who crosses 'em or gets in their way. You owe me that
smorgy
dinner, now. I'm risking my neck telling you all this."

>
"We'll get it to you. If you can find out anything more that we
can

>use, I'll upgrade that to Peking Duck, though."

>Bobby's voice sounded almost agonized. "You know how to torture
a
guy, Lois! I'll see what I can do."

>
Lois hung up and looked at her husband. "Find anything out from
the

>names of the missing girls?"

>"Jimmy's digging for bios, now," Clark told her. "He's having
some
difficulty getting through the university's firewall."

>
"Well, I can try to get hold of Lucy's roommates," Lois
suggested.

>"Maybe we can find out a little more about where she's been or
who
she might have met in the last few days."

>
"That's a good idea." Clark turned his head as Jimmy approached.

>"Find anything, Jimmy?"

>The young computer expert nodded. "Yeah. Here you go. New
Troy
State needs to upgrade its computer security. It only took me
about

>an hour to break in. I got pictures, descriptions, backgrounds
and
grades. Was there anything else you needed?"

>
"Not at the moment." Clark took the printout Jimmy handed him.

"Thanks,

>Jim."

>*****

>"They're going to meet us in the cafeteria of the Student
Union
Building," Lois told her husband as they rode the elevator

to the
>basement parking lot. Even Lois's aversion to the
Planet's
underground lot had not survived the weather today.
Metropolis was
>being inundated with a late spring rainstorm. The temperature
wasn't
particularly cold, but it was very wet.
>
"It *would* have to rain today," Lois said as she slid into the

>passenger seat. She much preferred to drive but, considering
the
weather conditions, had reluctantly turned the task over to
her
>husband.

>He grinned at her apologetically. "Sorry, honey. Even
Superman
can't do much about a storm like this."
>
"No kidding. And it couldn't be just an ordinary storm," Lois
muttered.
>
"Huh?"
>
"It had to be this kind," she said, much to his bafflement.
"It's
>the kind of pouring, sloppy, super-wet kind of rain that gets
you
soaked even if you've got a raincoat and umbrella and rain
boots and
>everything. You can't much go anywhere or do anything because
you
come back dripping wet, and there's fender benders on all the
streets
>and you'll probably have to take off somewhere halfway through
this
to pull somebody out of a ditch that he should have avoided
but
>didn't because he was driving too fast for the conditions!"

>The light dawned. "Oh," Clark said. He smothered a grin. The
Lane
babble gene seemed to be in full rant mode today. Maybe that
was a
>good sign. "Don't worry, honey. Even if somebody winds up in
a
ditch, I don't plan on going anywhere unless there's piranhas in
the
>water or something. It'll do people good to pay the city for
the
rescue for a change. Maybe it'll make them realize they can't
always
>rely on Superman to save them from the results of their own
poor
judgement."
>
"You mean you want to keep an eye on me in case I actually *do*
go into
>labor!"

>"Well, that too."

>"How about that wacko who tried to sue you last month for not
being
there to pull his motorcycle out of the water?" she asked,
reverting
>in typical Lane style to the former subject.

>"You mean when he rode it into the duck pond in Centennial Park?
You
know that didn't go anywhere. It was dismissed as a frivolous

>lawsuit."

>"Yeah, but he tried."

>"So do lots of people. The courts decided last year that
people
couldn't sue Superman for not being somewhere when they had
an
>accident. That's like trying to sue a cop for not being in
a
particular alley when somebody gets held up. It's silly.
Besides,

>Superman doesn't have any money. How could he pay anyone?"

>"Clark Kent does."

>"Clark Kent isn't the one who gets sued," Clark said.

>"True." She looked thoughtful. "Maybe I should do an article
pointing things like that out," she mused. "It would sure save us

>some aggravation. Maybe an interview..."

>"Yeah, maybe. It might do a little bit to unclog the local courts,"
Clark agreed. "So, who did you get hold of for us to talk to?"

>
Lois shifted uncomfortably in the seat and readjusted the position of

>her seatbelt. She rubbed her middle. "I spoke to the roommates of
two of the missing women. We're going to talk to them first, then

>we'll go over to Lucy's dorm and see some of her friends. It may be
a waste of time, but you never know."

>
"Yeah," Clark said.

>
Lois fell silent for a moment, looking out at the flooded streets and

>sidewalks. Clark concentrated on driving. Ahead of them the roadway
was so full of water that a car, trying to brake for a red light,

>hydroplaned into the intersection. Fortunately, Clark was able to
avoid the skidding vehicle which came to rest against the curb. The

>driver, a youngish man with a full-sized handlebar mustache, swore
eloquently, and quite clearly to Clark's hearing, gunned the engine,

>showering several unlucky pedestrians with dirty water, and rocketed
across the street and out of sight. An elderly man shouted and shook

>his fist after him.

>"Wow," Clark said. "There goes an accident looking for a place to happen."

>"Huh?" Lois glanced at him.

>"Reckless driver," he explained.

>"Oh."

>"Lois, are you all right?"

>"Yeah." She rubbed her middle again. "I was just thinking, trying
to figure out why somebody would be kidnapping so many women. I've

>got this really wild idea."

>"Okay, let's hear it."

>"Well, last night on the news I heard a government spokesman for
Fostonia denying that the rumors about a white slave trade operating

>there were true. Bobby said this group, whoever they are, were
operating down south, doing the same thing they're doing here. What

>if the rumors are true?"

>Clark raised his eyebrows at the thought, while avoiding a large,
shaggy wet dog that tried to commit suicide by diving under the

>Jeep's wheels. "White slave trade? That sounds like something that
would be right up Ralph's alley."

>
"I know; that's what I thought. But what if it's true?"

>
"Well, it's happened before. I guess it's possible. It would

>explain why none of the women have been...found." The thought made
him shudder.

>
"It sure would," Lois said. "And an operation like that would have

>to have some kind of organization behind it. It's not something a
couple of amateurs is going to put together. They'd have to have

>some way of transporting the women, for one thing. You're not going
to just pack them on a cruise ship with a ticket to Fostonia or

>something."

>"No, I can see that wouldn't work," he agreed, a slight quiver in his
voice.

>
"And they're a pretty diverse lot. I mean," Lois pursued, "don't

>serial killers usually have a 'type' they tend to target?"

>"A lot of them do."

>"Well, look at the victims. Three Caucasian, one Asian, two black
and one Native American. Talk about an equal opportunity kidnapper!"

>
"I see what you mean," Clark agreed. "You might be right."

>
"Which means someone's targeting them...maybe meeting them ahead of

>time, finding out about them from other people who know them. Maybe
we can find out who."

>

>
"Amy said they'd be sitting at a corner table," Lois said. "That must be

>it."

>There were two young women at the table Lois indicated, who looked up
at their approach.

>
"Amy Green?" Lois asked.

>
The petite blond nodded. "You must be Lois Lane and Clark Kent. I

>recognize you from your pictures."

>"That's right." Clark glanced questioningly at the second occupant
of the table.

>
The lanky brunette smiled. "I'm Yolanda Elder, Yo to my friends.

>Have a seat."

>Clark held a chair for Lois, then took the one next to her. When
they were all seated, Clark spoke.

>
"You two are friends of Anita Stewart and Tanya Weiss?"

>
"Anita's my roommate," Yolanda said. "Tanya is Amy's. What do you

>need to know?"

>"Can you tell us a little about them?" Lois asked. "What they're
like, what they like to do, anyone new they might have met in the

>days before they disappeared?"

>Amy frowned. "Well, Tanya is one of those people everybody likes, if
you know what I mean, Ms. Lane. She's really smart and pretty and

>friendly, and everybody likes her."

>"Did anything different happen to her in the last few days before she
disappeared?" Clark asked. "Or did she meet anybody new? Maybe

>someone who wanted to know about her family or background?"

>"Um..." Amy was obviously trying hard to remember. "She met a new
guy she really liked at a party a couple of nights earlier. She said

>he was really cute, but I don't know who he was. His name was Ben or
Bob or Bill or something like that."

>
"That's funny," Yolanda said. "Anita went to a party a couple of

>days before *she* disappeared. We both did. It was at Walberg
House."

>
Clark's eyebrows went up. "*Walberg* House? That's an odd name for

>a fraternity."

>"It's not a frat house. It's a house off campus where a lot of the
graduate students live. It got named for some rich guy who donated

>it to the university about twenty-five years ago, I think.

They
throw a lot of parties over there. I don't know how they get any

>studying done, to tell you the truth. A few times last semester it
got so loud the neighbors called the cops."

>
"Oh," Lois said. "Uh, could you tell us what happened the day Anita

>disappeared?"

>"Sure." Yolanda scowled, obviously trying to recall. "I don't think
much happened that day, really. It was a Tuesday. Anita was going

>to a movie with some friends. She was supposed to meet them in the
Quad, but she never showed up. They finally went on without her.

>She left the dorm about six, and that was the last anybody saw of
her."

>
"That's pretty much what happened with Tanya," Amy said. "She'd gone

>to the library to study. According to the librarian she left at six
when they closed and nobody ever saw her again. But the book she

>checked out was returned in the night book return slot a couple of
days later."

>
"That's interesting," Lois said. "Can you think of anything else

>that might help? Does Anita or Tanya have a boyfriend? Maybe we
could talk to them."

>
"Anita doesn't have any one regular boyfriend," Yolanda said. "She

>dates a lot of guys, but she hasn't gotten serious about any of them."

>"Tanya's fiancÃ© lives in Seattle," Amy said.

>"I see." Clark glanced at Lois. "I guess that fits." He smiled at
them. "I guess that covers it, then. Thanks for taking the time to

>talk to us."

>"We were glad to," Amy said. "I hope it helps find them. This is
really kind of scary, you know?" She gave Clark an admiring look.

>"Um...I'm a journalism major. Could I have your autographs before
you leave?"

>

>
Salli James, one of Lucy's roommates, was at the dormitory when

Lois

>and Clark arrived. She invited them in with a wave of her hand.
"Nobody had time to pick up this morning, and Carol had to leave, so

>I told her I'd stay and talk to you. Have a seat." She surveyed
Lois with open curiosity. "You're Lucy's sister?"

>
"Yes. I'm Lois Lane." Lois gingerly took a seat on a desk chair

>with someone's bra draped over the back.

>"The reporter? Wow!" Salli thrust a pack of gum at her. "Want some
chewing gum?"

>
"Uh...no, thanks," Lois said. Clark shook his head.

>
"Okay." Salli popped a piece into her mouth and chewed vigorously,

>looking Clark up and down with open admiration. "Wow! Is this your
partner?"

>
"Yes," Lois said, resisting the urge to bristle. "This is Clark

>Kent, my husband."

>"I read your stuff," Salli commented, still looking at Clark.

"I
didn't know Lucy had famous relatives."

>
"Didn't she mention us?" Clark asked.

>
Salli shook her head. "She said she had a married sister, that's

>all. Wow," she repeated. Clark squirmed slightly, and Lois reminded
herself how much he disliked being ogled.

>
"We're trying to find out what happened to Lucy," she said, trying to

>ignore Salli's obvious appreciation of her husband. "Carol said she
left about six-fifteen and didn't come back?"

>
"I dunno. I wasn't here," Salli said. "If Carol said so, she probably

>did."

>"Could you tell us if Lucy went to any parties in the week before she
disappeared?" Clark asked, suddenly.

>
Salli chomped on her gum, apparently thinking. "Yeah, I think she

>did...three or four days ago. They had the big spring beer bust over
at Walberg House."

>
"A beer party?" Lois asked.

>
"Yeah. The Administration doesn't like it, but they're off campus

>and don't allow anybody under twenty-one, so nobody can do much.

A
bunch of us went...I think Lucy did, too. I wasn't paying much

>attention."

>"I'll bet, " Lois muttered under her breath.

>Salli added, "I hope you find her." She looked wistfully at Clark.
"You got any brothers?"

>

>
"Do you suppose this Walberg House is connected to the kidnappings?"

>Lois wondered aloud. Clark held the umbrella for her while she
maneuvered herself awkwardly into the Jeep, then hurried around to

>the driver's side. He slid quickly behind the wheel, then turned,
removing his glasses, and fanned low-level heat vision over her,

>beginning at her head and ending with her feet. Steam began to rise
from her clothing and shoes.

>
"There." He replaced his glasses and started up the engine. "I

>think," he said, resuming the conversation, "that it's at least an
interesting coincidence that all three women were at parties the week

>before they disappeared and at least two of the three were at Walberg
House. Maybe we should take a look at the place."

>
"We can drive by, I guess," she suggested. "And maybe Superman

>should take a closer look."

>"I guess so," Clark said. "I don't like to snoop on people's privacy
with only flimsy evidence to go on, but..."

>
Lois's cell phone rang, interrupting his sentence. She fished it out

>of her purse. "Hello? Oh, hi Bobby." A pause. "More information?
Well, what is it?" She was silent for a second.

"*What*? Repeat

>that...You're sure? No, I'm not insulting you; I was just surprised.
Okay, if this pans out you're up for a Peking Duck dinner. Thanks,

>Bobby. I'll be in touch." She shut off the phone and looked at
Clark. "Wow!"

>
"What?"

>
"That was Bobby. He did some more asking around--I guess he really

>wants that Peking Duck. He found out a name for us. Walberg."

>Clark stared at her. "Well," he said, finally, "I guess it wasn't a
coincidence after all."

>
"I guess not." She punched in a number on her cell phone.

>
"Who are you calling?"

>
"Jimmy. I want a list of the students who live in Walberg House, and

>some background on them. Then we can go look at it ourselves."

>*****

>Walberg House, it turned out, was located a short distance from the
campus, itself. It was an old, classic Victorian house, which had

>been turned into a rooming house for students. They drove past it,
noting the neat, well-kept appearance, except for someone's shirt

>which appeared to have been hung on an upstairs window sill to dry,
and was consequently getting soaked. Rose bushes in the front yard

>were putting out their spring buds and one or two more courageous
early roses had already made their debut. Several young men were

>visible with umbrellas and raincoats as they ducked in and out the
front door, but no one more than glanced at the silver Jeep Cherokee

>which cruised slowly down the quiet, residential street and past the
house.

>
"Well," Lois said, when they turned back out onto the wider street

>again, "that didn't tell us much."

>"I'll come back a little later on my own," Clark said. "I don't expect much to be going on by day and in the open, anyhow."

>
"Yeah. I guess we've learned about all we can here, for now," Lois
>admitted. "Let's get back and see what Jimmy's found out."

>*****

>It was past four when they arrived back at the Daily Planet. Jimmy
had the list of students now inhabiting the house, but was still

>working on backgrounds.

>"I'll have them for you by tomorrow morning," he assured Clark.
>"If
I get the information any sooner I'll give you a call, okay?"

>
"Okay," Clark said. He glanced around to see Lois as she came out of

>the elevator with CJ. She had stopped by the Planet's day care
center to pick him up. "I think Lois has about reached her limit for

>the day, Jimmy. We'll be at home if you need to get hold of us."

>"You got it, CK." Jimmy also glanced at Lois and dropped his voice.
"Isn't she supposed to get off at one until the baby's born?"

>
"Yeah, but that's on hold for now." Clark's voice sounded grim, even

>to his own ears. "Her sister's disappeared. Probable kidnapping."

>Jimmy's eyes widened. "Is *that* what you've been investigating?
Why didn't you tell me?" At Clark's nod, his face hardened with

>determination. "I'll get that information for you as fast as I can.
That's a promise. And if there's anything else I can help you with,

>just tell me, okay?"

>"I will, Jimmy. Thanks." Clark clapped him lightly on the shoulder
and went to lift CJ from his wife's arms. "Come on, honey, let's

>call it a day."

>Behind him, he heard Ralph's voice say, "What did Kent want, Olsen?"

>"None of your business, Ralph," Jimmy said, pleasantly.

>"Come on, Olsen! Give a guy a break!"

>"Why don't you ask him?" Jimmy suggested, and Clark hid a grin. His
pesky co-worker wasn't going to get much out of Jimmy, that was

>certain.

>*****

>When they arrived at the townhouse, Clark went directly to the phone
and dialed a number. Lois sank onto the couch and put her feet up

>with a sigh of relief.

>"I don't know which is worse," she remarked, while Clark waited for
someone to answer, "the five hundred daily visits to the bathroom or

>the swollen feet. Who are you calling?"

>He had opened his mouth to answer when he heard the receiver being
picked up and a familiar voice said, "Hello?"

>
"Hi, Mom," Clark said.

>
"Clark!" His mother's voice sounded excited. "Is it time?"

>
"No, not quite," he answered. "I was wondering if you'd mind coming
>a day early."

>"No problem at all, honey. What's going on?"

>"I'd rather explain that in person if you don't mind, Mom,"
Clark
said. "Something's happened and we could use your help, especially
>since things are as close as they are."

>"I've had my bag packed for the last three weeks," Martha Kent's
voice said with a laugh. "You can come get me whenever you like."
>
"Would now be too soon?"
>
"Now's fine. Just give me time to explain to your father and I'll be
>ready."

>"Okay. I'll be there in a few minutes, then."

>When he hung up, Lois was looking at him accusingly. "Why didn't you
tell me you were going to call your Mom?"
>
"I just thought of it," Clark explained. "You can use the help right
>now, what with this investigation and everything. You're having to
put a lot of energy into it when you should be taking it easier, so I
>figured Mom can take over some of the things like helping look after
CJ."
>
She glanced at their son, who was tottering his way across the carpet
>toward Clark. "You're right--especially now that he's walking.
Sorry I snapped at you." Unexpectedly she sniffled. "I don't mean
>to be so cross, Clark."

>Instantly, he was seated next to her on the sofa. "Hey, what's the
matter?"
>
"I don't know...yes, I do," she contradicted herself at once. "I'm
>so fat and clumsy right now, and women are looking at you all the
time and wondering what this foxy guy sees in me, and--"

>
"Hey," he said. "So what if they wonder what I see in you? *I* know
>what I have, and I wouldn't trade you and CJ and this one--"
he
rested a hand on her rounded tummy, feeling the muscles grow hard
>under his fingers in one of those painless contractions, "for any
other woman on Earth." He leaned forward to kiss her lightly. "It
>won't be long now, Lois. I have the feeling that we're just about
down to the wire, here. Really."
>
"I just hope we can find Lucy first," she said, but she smiled.

>
"Me, too. I wouldn't like having to conduct the rest of the
>investigation by myself." He stood up. "I'm going to get Mom now,
and after I get back with her I'll take a trip over to Walberg House
>to see what I can see, okay?"

>"Okay," she said. "Better tell Martha to wear a raincoat."

>*****

>When he returned from his trip, carrying Martha Kent, wrapped in
yards of plastic raincoat, and the ancient suitcase he could remember

>from his days as a small child when they had gone to visit relatives,
Lois was on the phone.

>
"Yes, Inspector," she was saying. "But this investigation she was

>involved with wouldn't have anything to do with the missing women, by
any chance?" A short silence. "Why not? I'm not going to go

>running to the paper to splash it all over the front page! Look, my
sister's been kidnapped. You don't expect me to sit around doing

>nothing, do you?" She listened for a moment. "Well, I'm not
everybody else, in case you haven't noticed. I don't sit around." A

>pause. "So what if I'm about to have a baby? What difference does
that make?" A long pause, this time. "Of course I'll keep it

>confidential...Okay...Okay...she was, huh? Okay, thanks, Henderson.
Yeah, you have a nice day, too. Goodbye."

>
Clark set his mother on her feet and zipped up the steps with the

>suitcase to deposit it in the spare bedroom, then descended the
stairs a second later, still in the Suit. "How was Inspector

>Henderson, honey?" he asked, although he had a pretty good idea.

>"He was okay," Lois said innocently. "He just told me Detective
Brett is doing a little better, but she won't be able to tell them

>much for a while. She was investigating the kidnappings. She must
have found something, but they don't know what." She turned to her

>mother-in-law. "Hi, Martha. I'm glad you're here."

>"So am I," Martha said. She stood back, surveying Lois's figure.
"My, you've bloomed since I saw you a couple of months ago. You look

>wonderful."

>Lois made a resigned face. "If bulging at the seams is wonderful."

>"It is," Martha said. "It means that soon you'll be giving birth to
a small miracle."

>
"It *is* a miracle, you know," Clark said. "Especially if you

>consider the circumstances."

>"I know," Lois said. "And I really am happy about it. I'm just
getting awfully impatient, waiting for something to happen."

>
"And it will," Martha said. "Now, why don't you sit back down, put

>your feet up and let me do the work right now? Clark told me what's
happened to your sister. Clark, you said you had something to do

>after we got here?"

>"Right," he said. "A little snooping. I'll be back shortly."

He
broke off as he saw Lois wince. "Honey?"

>
"Go ahead, Clark. It's just the usual."

>
"Okay." He glanced significantly at his mother, who smiled and

made

>shooing motions with her hands.

>"Go," she said. "Even if it's real, nothing will happen right away."

>Slightly reassured, he kissed his wife and whisked out of the room.

>*****

>"Clark, I keep telling you that it's nothing but the same stuff
that's been going on all week," Lois was saying as the elevator doors

>opened on the newsroom floor the next morning. "Every so often the
muscles all tighten up, but it doesn't hurt a bit. I wish something

>*would* happen, believe me!"

>Clark looked dubiously at his wife as they exited the elevator.

"I
don't know, Lois. You had one every seventy-three minutes all night

>long. I know. You woke me up by squirming around every time it
happened and I checked the time."

>
"It's the pressure," Lois explained patiently. "Honestly, Clark,

>you're getting jumpier about this than I am."

>"Sorry. I can't help it," he apologized. "I just have this
'feeling' about it."

>
"So, now you're psychic?" she challenged.

>
"How should I know?" he replied. "I'm just telling you how I feel."

>
"I'll take your word for it," Lois said. "As far as I'm concerned,

>the whole business is on hold until we get this thing with Lucy
solved, and her found."

>
"Hey, guys," Jimmy called as they came down the ramp. "I've got that

>information you wanted."

>"What do you have?" Lois asked, hurrying so quickly that she almost
stumbled and Clark's heart jumped into his throat.

>
"I've got all the stuff in the conference room," Jimmy said.

>"Figured it would be easier to spread out all the paper on the table
there."

>
"Good idea," Clark said. He hadn't failed to note the instant

>attention on Ralph's part.

>Neither had Jimmy. Their young friend closed and locked the
conference room door after them. "Ralph's been after me ever since

>yesterday about your investigation," he said in an annoyed tone.
"He's got some idea you've got this secret source for scoops and he's

>pulling out all the stops to find out what it is. I'd watch him if I
were you. I caught him trying to peek over my shoulder when I was

>hunting up records from Florida this morning."

>"Florida?" Clark asked.

>"Yeah. There's twelve guys living in Walberg House right now.

Nine
of them have been there since at least from the beginning of the

>school year, but three of them transferred in at the semester break
from the same school down in Florida."

>
"Florida," Lois said. "'Down south'."
>
"Huh?" Jimmy said.
>
"Bobby told us this bunch had moved in from 'down south'," Clark said.
>
"Oh. Well, I thought you'd want to know where they came from and if
>they've got any police records, or anything."

>"We do. Nice thinking, Jimmy." Lois leaned over the yards of paper
laid out across the table.
>
"Thanks. The stuff on the left is the information on the others. I
>separated out the three new guys in that pile on the right."

>"Thanks a lot, Jimmy," Clark said.

>"No sweat. If you need anything else, just tell me. And Ralph's not
getting *anything* out of me," Jimmy said with uncharacteristic
>acerbity. "If he wants a big story, let him go out and work for it
the way the rest of us do!"
>
"There's one thing," Clark said. "Is there any way you can find out
>for us if any female students happened to disappear from their last
school?"
>

>"You got it. It was probably in the local papers. I can do a search
for it. Shouldn't take long." Jimmy unlocked the door and opened it
>suddenly, almost in Ralph's face. "Good grief, Ralph!" he snapped,
irritably. "Do you *like* getting doors rammed into your nose, or
>something?"

>"I think," Clark said, after Jimmy had left the room, "that our young
friend is seriously ticked off."
>
"I am, too," Lois said. "Ralph's been making a pest of himself ever
>since Perry told him he couldn't be your partner. Like Jimmy says,
he seems to think there's some secret other than hard work and
>investigative skills to coming up with the scoops. If we don't
discourage him he's going to seriously interfere when you have to go
>out and...you know."

>"Well, we'll have to think about how to do that after we've got Lucy
back safe," Clark said. He began to sift quickly through the

>information Jimmy had provided. "Hmmm. Looks like Jimmy did a lot of
digging. Good photos, too. Nothing here, no...no, and no. Give me
>that stuff on the new guys, would you?"

>Lois handed the much smaller stack to him. He scanned it quickly.
"Huh. Look at this. Our three transfers are Robert Ashley, age
>twenty-three, business major, Peter Brookes, twenty-four, a law
student, and Tyler Griggs, twenty-three, major in philosophy."

>
Lois laughed, but didn't comment.
>
"Backgrounds..." Clark continued, "middle to upper class families, no
>felonies. Griggs has three DUIs in the past couple of years. Ashley
was arrested for assault, but the victim dropped the

charges."

>
"I wonder why?" Lois said.

>
"It doesn't say, but look at this! Peter Brookes apparently was

>caught cheating on his law exams, but his dad made a
sizeable
donation to the university's law school and the school
officials

>dropped the matter."

>"How on earth does Jimmy find this stuff out?" Lois muttered.

>"I don't know, but he should work for the FBI...Lois, are you all
right?"

>She rubbed her abdomen. "Darn, but these things are annoying!

I
just wish they'd *do* something!"

>
Clark checked his watch. Seventy-two minutes since the last one.

>Maybe it didn't mean anything, but the regularity of the
contractions
put him on the alert.

>
Lois noticed. "Don't get excited, Clark. They don't hurt a bit."

>
"Okay. But you don't mind if I time them, do you?"

>
She rolled her eyes. "Go right ahead; you will anyway. But in
the

>meantime, maybe we should make an appointment to talk to these
three."

>"Probably," Clark said. "Last night was a complete waste of
time,
though. The only thing I saw at Walberg House was another
party--and

>several couples doing things I'd rather *not* have seen--but
that
doesn't mean it's not connected."

>
"My guess," Lois said, "is that it's simply used by our suspects
as a

>way to spot the candidates. Probably nothing else happens
there."

>"Yeah." He reached for the phone directory. "Let's give them a
call."
There was a quick knock on the door five minutes later as
he was

>hanging up the phone.

>Lois opened it. "That was fast."

>"It wasn't hard to find," Jimmy said. "Nine female
students
disappeared over a period of six months. The last one
vanished on

>December seventh."

>Clark looked at Lois. "It looks like we may have hit the
jackpot."

>*****

>Robert Ashley and Tyler Griggs were waiting for them when
they
arrived at the little one horse coffee shop not far from
NTSU's

>campus.

>Robert Ashley was a good-looking, dark-haired young man with
grey
eyes, and when he rose at their approach he stood several
inches

>above Clark's solid, six-foot frame. Tyler Griggs was shorter,
blond
and blue-eyed, and his gaze kept shifting back and forth
between

>Clark and his fellow student. He seemed unable or unwilling to
look
straight at Lois, Clark noted.

>
"Clark Kent and Lois Lane?" Ashley's voice was a deep, resonant

>baritone; Clark was reminded strongly of a speech instructor whose
class he had attended for one semester at Midwest U.

>
"That's right." He shook the man's extended hand briefly.

>
"I'm Bob Ashley; this is Ty Griggs. Peter asked us to explain that

>he'd be a bit late. He's at a lecture for his Legal Ethics class
that he couldn't afford to miss. They're reviewing for an exam

>that's worth fifty percent of the grade."

>"Of course," Lois said.

>"Shall we sit down?" Ashley gestured to chairs. Clark held Lois's
chair for her then took the one next to her. When they were seated,

>Ashley spoke again.

>"I was surprised when you called, Mr. Kent. Why would a pair of
newspaper reporters want to talk to us?"

>
"We're interviewing a number of people around the campus," Clark

>explained, smoothly. "Someone recommended we speak to you because
the three of you may have known some of the young women."

>
"Women?" Griggs asked.

>
"Yes. Seven young women have disappeared without a trace from the

>university campus since February," Lois said. "We've been trying to
trace their movements over the week before each of them vanished. We

>understand that they came to parties at Walberg House during that
time. We'd like to know anything you could remember about those

>visits: who they were with, who they spoke to, what they did--you
know. To try to give us more leads."

>
Clark took photos of the women, supplied by Jimmy, from the pocket of

>his jacket and placed them on the table. "Do you recognize any of
them?"

>
Ashley and Griggs leaned forward to look at the pictures. Griggs

>shook his head. "I don't recognize any of them," he said.

>He was lying. Clark could hear his pulse pounding fast and loud. He
glanced at Robert Ashley. The man's face was composed, but his heart

>rate had accelerated as well.

>"Look closely," Lois said. "Are you sure?"

>"Yeah, I think I recognize this one." Ashley picked up the photo of
Anita Stewart. "She was at the party we threw the last week of

>March. I'm afraid I don't remember her name, though."

>"Anita," Lois said. "Do you recognize this girl?" She held up the
photo of Lucy.

>
Ashley shook his head. "Can't say I do. Ty?"

>
The blond man shook his head nervously. "No."

>
Another young man was approaching the table as they spoke. He was

>tall and slender, with a narrow face and rather small, pale eyes
behind rimless glasses. Clark recognized him from the photo Jimmy

>had supplied of him, and the first impression he had of the man
in
person was that he would never make it as a lawyer. He *looked*
like
>a crooked lawyer. On second thought, he wondered if it would
make
any difference at all.
>
"Peter Brookes," he introduced himself. "You must be Clark Kent
and
>Lois Lane."

>Clark had risen to his feet when Brookes arrived. He shook
hands
with the newcomer and resumed his seat as the other man
pulled up a
>chair.

>"What's this all about?" Brookes asked.

>Robert Ashley explained briefly and Brookes nodded. "I see."
His
voice was composed. "Well, I don't know how much help I'll be,

>but--are these the missing girls?"

>"Yes," Lois said.

>"Hmmm..." Brookes leaned forward, looking closely at the
photos.
"Some of them do look familiar," he admitted. "I think
this one was
>at the spring...uh...to put it frankly, the yearly spring beer
bust
last Saturday night." He indicated Lucy's photograph.
"Attractive
>girl. You say she's disappeared? Is there any evidence of
foul
play?"
>
"Some," Clark admitted. This guy was smooth! His heartbeat was
no
>faster than normal, and there wasn't the slightest trace
of
uneasiness in his voice.
>
Something else was nagging him for attention, something he
should
>recognize. He groped futilely for the feeling for several
seconds,
trying to pin it down without success.
>
"Can you tell us who she might have been with that night?" Lois
asked.
>
Brookes frowned thoughtfully at the picture of Lucy, slowly
removed
>his glasses and began to polish them carefully with his
handkerchief.

>Clark's nostrils twitched. He had it, now. He'd found
a
handkerchief tangled in the hedge near Lucy's car, and on it he
had
>smelled the faint scent of expensive cologne.

>The same cologne that Peter Brookes was wearing right now. That
was
what he had noticed when the man had arrived.
>
"I don't remember that she was with anyone," Brookes said at
last.
>"I'm sorry. I can't think of anything particularly helpful."

>*****

>A few minutes later they said their farewells and departed.

>"Well," Lois said, as she climbed into the driver's seat, "What do
you
think?"
>
Clark shut the door for her. "Shh. I'm listening."
>
Lois fell silent, watching him expectantly. He leaned on her
window
>and tuned his hearing to the three young men still inside the
coffee
shop.

>
"Did you do it?" Tyler Griggs' voice asked.
>
"Yeah." That was Brookes. "With any luck it'll delay them 'til

>we're done. Things are getting too hot here. First that cop and
now
these two snoops."

>
"If we bolt now, people are going to notice," Robert Ashley's
voice

>interjected. "We've got to get the shipment out tonight, then
we'll
just lie low for a while; we should be all right. No one can
prove

>anything once the evidence is gone, now that the cop is out of
the
way."

>
"I agree." Brookes' voice was confident. "You two take the car
and

>drive around. They'll follow you. I'm going to see Jeffers."

>"They're coming out," Clark said. "They're our pigeons, Lois.
I'll
go into detail later. Griggs and Ashley are the decoys.
Follow

>them. I'm going to trail Brookes...from five hundred feet."

>"Got it," Lois said. "By the way, just in case you're
still
worrying, I'm still not having any labor. So much for your

>'feeling'."

>He didn't argue, but the feeling was still there, and he'd been
aware
that she'd had another one of the painless contractions
while they

>were sitting at the table, talking--exactly seventy-two minutes
after
the last one. Still, if Lois was in early labor or about to
go into

>it, as his mother had said yesterday, nothing would happen
right
away, and they couldn't sit around doing nothing while
waiting to see

>if this was another false alarm.

>"Here they come," he said. "I'll meet you at the Planet." He
kissed
her quickly on the mouth, and was gone.

>

>
From five hundred feet in the air, Superman saw the car bearing
Bob

>Ashley and Ty Griggs pull away from the curb and Lois followed
them
with her usual smooth skill. He watched them disappear down
the

>street and suppressed a stab of worry; Lois had good sense, she'd
be
all right simply following the two.

>
Below him, Peter Brookes emerged from the coffee shop, glanced
up and

>down the street and crossed to the white VW that was parked a
few
spaces behind the spot where the Jeep had been. In a moment he
was

>behind the wheel and headed in the same direction his two friends
and
Lois had taken.

>
Cruising at five hundred feet and completely out of sight of the

>normal human eye, Superman followed him.

>Brookes headed south and west, toward Metropolis's business
section.
Within twenty minutes, he was pulling into the parking
lot of a

>downtown office building. He parked in a space at the far end of

the
huge parking lot and strode briskly toward the tall structure.

>
Clark watched with a certain sense of deja vu. He was familiar with

>this location. He had been here as Clark Kent to interview
executives of Caribbean Imports in at least three investigations over

>the last few years. He and Lois *knew* beyond the shadow of a doubt
that the company was involved in numerous illicit activities, but in

>spite of the fact that it had been caught red-handed twice in two years,
their investigations had never been able to prove what they knew to

>be a fact. Somehow, the blame always managed to be placed on corrupt
employees acting without the sanction of the company heads.

>
Now, like a bad penny, the name had surfaced again. He watched

>expectantly as Peter Brookes took the elevator to the seventh floor
and entered the outer office of Caribbean Imports.

>
Clark landed behind the building's decorative shrubbery, made a quick

>change, and entered through the main doors with a brisk step.

>He went up the stairs to the seventh floor in seconds and paused in
the hall outside the outer office of the company. A quick peek with

>X-ray vision showed Brookes sitting in a chair, flipping absently
through the pages of an automotive magazine. To Brookes's left was

>the door to the office of Jeremiah P. Jeffers, whom Clark had
interviewed twice during his investigations. The man was impossible

>to pin down, as he had discovered during those two interviews, he
never gave a straight answer, and in Clark's opinion he was one of

>the smoothest operators in the business. His office was also
soundproofed and apparently painted with lead paint, for

>investigation months ago had shown him that his X-ray vision was
unable to penetrate it, precautions which he'd found to be--well,

>interesting, to say the least. Which meant that he wasn't going to
be able to hear what they had to say once Brookes got inside the

>office, unless he could think of a way around the obstacles.

>He looked around, grasping for inspiration.

>There was a nearly empty restroom next to the offices of Caribbean
Imports. He entered and waited for the single occupant to finish his

>business and leave. When the door swung shut behind him, Clark
locked it, then turned to scan the walls.

>
The wall to his right was impenetrable to his vision; that meant it

>was most likely the wall to Jeffers's office.

>Very cautiously, Clark used his little finger to drill a hole in the
plaster wall, through the lead paint and soundproofing, stopping just

>short of the surface. With only a thin layer of
sound-deadening
material separating him from the room beyond, the
stuff should no
>longer function to block noises within the room. Tuning his
hearing
to catch the faintest sound, he put one eye to the breach
he had
>created in the office's defenses and checked his work.

>Yes, he could see through the remaining barrier, now. Peter
Brookes
had apparently just entered, for he was standing
diffidently before
>the executive's desk, waiting to be noticed; a complete change
of
attitude from his former assured demeanor.
>
Clark could only see the profile of the man seated at the desk

>itself, but that was enough. J.P. Jeffers was the pompous and
very
superior company executive whom he had interviewed twice
before, and
>who had loftily denied any involvement with the crimes committed
by
persons in the company's employ. He appeared to be absorbed in

>reading a message on his computer screen and gave no attention to
the
man shifting nervously before him.
>
Jeffers finished reading whatever document had so held his
attention
>and looked up from the computer. "You have a problem, Mr.
Brookes?"

>"Yes, sir." Brookes's voice was no longer firm and confident;
he
fiddled uncomfortably with his watchband. "The reporters--Lane
and
>Kent--spoke to us a little while ago. They're trying to track
down
the missing women, and I'm sure they suspect us."
>
"You were sure of that this morning."
>
Brookes nodded. "Yes, sir. We're going to be making the last

>pick-up tonight, then I think we need to lie low for awhile.
With
the evidence gone, no one will be able to prove anything."

>
Jeffers lifted a hand and Brookes fell silent. "I agree."

>
"Thank you, sir."
>
"The Caribbean Lady will be lying off of Hobb's Bay tonight
after
>sunset, just outside the three-mile limit. Make your delivery
there
and then go into defense mode. Do nothing to draw attention
to
>yourselves. You'll receive a new assignment in about two
months."

>"Yes, sir."

>"However, these two reporters worry me. They may have told others
of
their suspicions. Is there any chance you were followed?"

>
"No, sir. They're following Ashley and Griggs. Any minute now
they
>should be having a tragic accident. If they survive it, they'll
be
in the hospital until well after we're through."

>
"Excellent."
>
That was the last word Clark heard of the conversation. In an

>instant he was out of the building and flinging himself into the

sky
over Metropolis, hurling himself frantically in the direction of the
>university.

>Where had Ashley and Griggs gone? In a city the size of Metropolis,
spotting one car somewhere in that vast area was close to impossible,
>at least in what little time he might have left.

>In sudden inspiration, he stopped in mid air and, with a small touch
of super-legerdemain, produced his cellular phone. As fast as the
>mechanism would handle it, he punched in the numbers to Lois's phone.

>Heart thumping suffocatingly in his chest, he listened for the ring.
Two rings, three, four--
>
"Hello?" Lois's voice said.
>
"Lois! Where are you?"
>
"Clark? What's going on?"
>
"Don't talk, just listen. Where are you?"
>
"I'm on the River Parkway, just after the Emerald Drive off ramp. What--?"
>
But Clark was no longer listening. With a burst of super-speed he
>headed for her location fast enough to startle the citizens of
Metropolis with the loudest sonic boom they had ever heard. In a
>split second he was over the section of parkway she had named in time
to see the Jeep lurch sideways as the right front wheel came loose.
>He pushed himself to higher speed as he dived for the skidding
vehicle and seized it as it started to roll.
>
In an instant he had righted it, supporting the right, front section
>and letting the momentum carry him backwards so as not to jar his
wife as she clutched the steering wheel, her eyes squeezed shut. At
>last, the Jeep came to rest against the center divider. He let it
down gently, sped to the driver's door, and yanked it open. In an
>instant he was holding Lois tightly in his arms.

>"Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

>She clutched him for a moment, shaking, then seemed to find her voice.

>"What happened?"

>"Are you hurt?" he asked again, forcing himself to release her. The
sight of Superman hugging the very pregnant wife of his best friend
>was not a spectacle to which he wanted to treat any curious passerby.

>"I...I don't think so," she stammered. "What happened?"

>"That's what I'm going to find out," he said. With a gust of air he
was gone and back again almost instantly, with the wheel. He set it
>on the ground and went to examine the right wheel well of the Jeep.

>Lois followed him. "What is it?"

>"Look." Clark indicated the places where the wheel had been attached
to the shaft. "Do you see this?"
>
"What?"
>
"Two of the bolts that hold the wheel on were cut nearly in two.

The

>nuts on the others were apparently removed. The person who did this
expected the two weakened bolts holding the wheel on to snap under

>the strain and the wheel to come off. It was a deliberate attempt to
injure or kill us."

>
"But who...?"

>
"Peter Brookes. I heard him tell J.P. Jeffers what he'd done."

>
"Who's...you mean that executive at..."

>
"Caribbean Imports." Clark turned to look her over carefully.

"Are

>you sure you're all right, Lois? Maybe I should fly you to Dr.
Klein..."

>
"Clark, I'm fine! Not even a bruise, thanks to you. You mean this

>is tied to Caribbean Imports?"

>He nodded, tuning his hearing to listen to their baby's heartbeat.
The steady, rapid sound was the same as always. Reassured, he took a

>deep breath and blew it slowly out, trying to quell the anger that
was beginning to boil under the surface. These people had tried to

>seriously injure, perhaps kill, his wife and child.

>Lois put a hand on his arm. "Clark, it's all right. I'm fine."

>"It's not all right," Clark said. "If I'd lost you--"

>"But you didn't. You got here in time. Let's deal with this--"

she
gestured to the Jeep, "--and you can fill me in on what you found

>out."

>He nodded slowly, drawing another breath, but the anger hadn't gone
away. "You're right. Get in the Jeep and I'll fly it to our

>mechanic; then we can talk."

>*****

>"It's just as well that you insisted we get the coverage for
vandalism," Clark was saying a couple of hours later. "Even if the

>premiums are higher." He tried to smile at her, and to keep his
voice light, but the smile felt stiff and unnatural.

>
Lois put a hand on his arm. "Come on, Clark. Let's go into the

>conference room so we can talk."

>When the door closed behind them, she turned to face him.

"Clark,
it's *over* and I'm not hurt. Neither is the baby."

>
"Lois, I should never have left you alone."

>
"I knew it!--you're blaming yourself, aren't you?" She grabbed both

>his hands. "Look at me, Clark! You are *not* to obsess over this!
Brookes and his friends are to blame, and behind them Caribbean

>Imports. Do you understand me? You saved me...again. And now we
know about the cargo ship. We actually have a chance to get Lucy

>back. You are *not* to blame yourself, Clark! I'm a grown woman,
and some of this stuff comes with the job."

>
He pulled her into his arms, wishing for the umpteenth time that

he

>could keep her this safe forever. But she wouldn't be Lois if she
>weren't free to do as she wished, even if it meant occasionally
>facing danger.

>She put a hand up to touch his cheek. "Clark, you saved me," she
>repeated. "I'm not hurt."
>
"I know..." He broke off as he felt the muscles across her middle
>grow hard as granite against his side. Lois grimaced.

>"Lois?" he asked.

>She shook her head. "I don't think so."

>"Does it hurt?"

>"No, not really. It's just a lot of pressure." She sighed.
>"I
figure Kryptonian pregnancies last ten or eleven months."

>
Clark checked his watch. "How many of them since the one in the coffee
>shop?"

>She shrugged. "I don't know. Four or five, maybe. Look, I've got an
>idea."
>
"What?"
>
"Well, this cargo ship is going to be off the coast just outside the
>three-mile limit."

>"And?"

>"And that means they're going to be reaching it via some kind of
>small boat, right?"
>
"Probably."
>
"So, most likely they're stowing the women near the docks, somewhere."
>Clark frowned, dubiously. "All seven of them? I doubt they'd keep
>them here for two months..."
>
"No, of course not," Lois said. "They probably ship them out once or
>twice a month. But Lucy should still be here, somewhere. Anyway,
remember that warehouse Caribbean Imports had on Pier 17 where we
>found the drugs that time?"

>"How could I ever forget?"

>"Well, what if they have other holdings around there, other buildings
maybe even under the names of dummy companies or something? I mean,
>once they realized someone was onto them they might have started
taking more precautions."
>
Clark nodded slowly. "It's not only possible but likely. Anyway,

>it's worth a shot. Let's see what Jimmy can find us. We've got a
>few hours before sunset. They're not going to try to grab their

>'last shipment' by daylight."

>"Or ship anybody out," Lois agreed. She opened the door.
>"Jimmy!"

>*****

>Perry White watched his star investigative team and wondered what
they were up to now. Two hours before, the tremendous sonic boom
>that marked the passage of Superman across the skies of
Metropolis--and a Superman in a big hurry if Perry knew anything

>about the man--had rattled the windows of the Planet building, but no
>big story had followed, so he concluded the cause was a more personal

>one. At first he'd considered the possibility of the imminent
>arrival of the newest Kent, but when they'd walked into the newsroom

>a short time ago it was obvious that had not been the cause, either.
>But he'd noticed an increase in Clark's tendency to hover over his

>wife and the fact that Lois wasn't objecting. Something had
>happened, that was for sure, and probably in connection with this

>latest thing they were investigating. He toyed for a moment with the
>thought of asking for a progress report, but decided against it.

>He'd learned from experience that left alone, Lane and Kent could
>produce results that gave the editors of other papers heartburn on a

>regular basis.

>On the other hand, one couldn't say that about all the reporters on the
>staff.

>"Ralph!" he barked. "Where's that piece you promised me on the

>municipal court bribery scandal?"

>"I'm waiting for a call back from one of my sources, Chief," Ralph said.

>"Make sure he doesn't forget about you," Perry said.

>"I won't--I mean, I will." Ralph moved a little closer to Perry and
>lowered his voice. "Chief, I wanted to talk to you about that

>partnering suggestion I made..."

>"Ralph, my decision's made," Perry said. "Kent's writing and yours
>just don't mesh. Not only that, but by the time you're up to speed,

>Lois will be back."

>"I thought maybe I could benefit from learning his methods--you know,
>to improve my own investigative skills..."

>"Ralph," Perry said, "there's nothing wrong with your investigative

>skills when you use 'em the right way. You wouldn't have been hired
>here, otherwise. Lane and Kent apply themselves to their job--the

>secret is just plenty of hard work and attention to details. You
>might go at it a little differently, but that doesn't mean your

>method is wrong. You do your job and let them do theirs and you'll
>do fine."

>Ralph glanced resentfully at the Planet's top reporting team which

>was now in conference with Jimmy Olsen. Jimmy was nodding; Clark
>clapped him lightly on the shoulder and the Planet's computer expert

>turned to the keyboard in front of him.

>Lois moved slowly to her desk and eased down into her chair. Clark
>took a position behind her, beginning to rub her shoulders.

>Yep, Perry thought. *Something* had happened, all right, and Clark

>was in full-blown protective mode. That meant Lois had been at the
>center of it; somehow she'd been in danger and Superman had

performed

>another hair-breadth rescue.

>The phone on Lois's desk shrilled and she reached forward to pick up
the receiver.

>
"Lois Lane," he heard her say. "What? Yes, of course it was

>vandalism. Do you think I'd saw through the bolts on my own wheel
for fun?"

>
Perry felt his eyebrows rise. This was interesting. Besides, it was

>a boss's job to know what his employees were doing, wasn't it?

>"What do you mean, 'at least a week'?" Her voice rose to a level
where he didn't have to strain to hear. "Can't it be done any

>sooner?" She paused, evidently listening. "All right! Fine! I'll
expect the replacement vehicle first thing tomorrow morning, then."

>Another pause, and he saw her jaw set. "Look, you...look, I'm
expecting a baby any minute and I don't intend to be caught somewhere

>without a car when I need to get to the hospital!...Fine! My husband
will pick it up in the morning!" She hung up.

>
Well, Perry inferred, the case must be progressing, then. The

>requisite attempt to kill one of them had been made. Should he set
aside room on the front page for the evening edition? He glanced at

>the wall clock. Nah, it was going to press in forty-five minutes.
Maybe he'd better have a contingency plan for tomorrow, however, just

>in case...

>He was doing last minute edits to Ralph's piece forty minutes later,
when he happened to glance up in time to see Clark, Lois and Jimmy

>huddled together by Jimmy's desk. The three had an air of excitement
about them that no one could fail to note. They must have found

>*something*, he knew. Lane and Kent headed for the coat rack and
thence up the ramp toward the elevator.

>
Ralph had noticed, too, Perry realized with a sense of resignation.

>The man was headed for the stairs. At that moment, Perry saw Lois
grimace and put a hand on her middle. He'd seen her do that a couple

>of times today, and his brow puckered momentarily. He'd be willing
to wager money on the probability that there would be a new little

>Kent yelling his or her head off by morning, and he thought Clark
suspected the same thing, but no one tried to prevent Mad Dog Lane

>from following a hot lead, not even Superman. He'd just have to put
his faith in Clark to do whatever was necessary if something

>happened. And he hoped they would be able to evade Ralph, who had
now vanished down the stairs.

>
The elevator arrived as he watched, and Lane and Kent boarded.

>
Perry turned back to his editing job. He made one final correction

>and hit the "enter" key. Just under the wire, he reflected.
As
always.
>

>
"I hope this is it," Lois said breathlessly as they exited the

>elevator on the first floor.

>"Well, there has to be some reason the real owner was hidden
so
well," Clark said. "How many holding companies did Jimmy say he
had
>to trace it through?"

>"Six," Lois said. "Anyway, after we solve this, we've got
more
information we can use to go after Caribbean Imports again.
They're
>good at blaming things on everybody else. Just like Lex was.
But
they have to have a weak spot somewhere." She bit her lip. "I
just
>hope Lucy's okay."

>"I'd say these guys are going to keep their 'merchandise' in
good
shape," Clark said, distastefully. "They probably don't get
as high
>a price if the women are hurt or sick. They might not be
very
comfortable, but I imagine we don't have to worry about their
health."
>
"That's what I've been telling myself," Lois said.

>
"Lois," Clark said, quietly, "we're going to get her back.
That's a
>promise."

>"I know." She smiled at him. "Let's hail a taxi. What a time
to
have the Jeep out of service."
>
Clark placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled shrilly. A
taxi
>screeched to a stop in front of them.

>"Pier Twenty-four," Clark said, as they clambered into the rear
seat.

>The driver glanced dubiously at Lois's midriff. "You sure?"

>"Of course we are," Lois said, a little crossly. "We're in a
hurry,
if you don't mind."
>
Clark glanced unobtrusively at her. Lois was being more snappish

>than she had been earlier, and he had not missed the fact that
the
last contraction had been a mere fifty minutes since the
previous one.
>
"Lois?" he asked quietly, "are you all right?"
>
She smiled briefly and nodded. "I'm okay, Clark. If it turns out

>this *is* labor--and it probably isn't--we've got plenty of
time.
The last one still didn't hurt."
>
Reassuring himself that she was probably right--and besides,
they
>were only going to look--he allowed himself to relax slightly.

>Neither of them noticed the taxi that was following them.

>*****

>The warehouse looked like any other warehouse Lois had ever seen,
and
she had seen more than she cared to during her career as an

>investigative reporter. If every bad guy in the world didn't want

to
kill her inside of one, it seemed as if a good percentage of them had
>tried. It was big, utilitarian, and dingy. The scenery was exactly
like the rest of the area around here; the docks stretched out over
>the brownish water, dirty and weatherbeaten, and the distinct smell
of fish and seawater, decaying plants and sea life made her stomach
>queasy.
>Clark stuck close to her side; after the near-miss earlier today and
the fact that she was sure he thought she was going into labor,
>getting him to move more than a few feet away from her would probably
be an impossible task and, if the truth be told, she didn't mind.
>There was an aching sensation in her lower back--of course, her lower
back had been hurting for months, but this was different, almost as
>if something back there was clamping down purposefully in response to
the tightening muscles across her abdomen.
>
She glanced at her watch--the contraction was only thirty minutes
>since the last one. Hopefully it didn't mean anything. She couldn't
afford to go into labor now! The painless contractions had been
>extremely irregular until just last night. Maybe it was just another
bout of false labor, she thought hopefully.
>
In the west, the sun was sinking toward the horizon. It was still
>light, but it wouldn't be for much longer. There would be time for a
quick look around and, if Clark found anything, a call to Henderson
>or perhaps a more purposeful foray by Superman. Nothing to it, she
reassured herself. And, with luck, Lucy would be safe.

>
Again, for the latest uncounted time since they had determined that
>her sister had actually been kidnapped, she pushed down the almost
frantic worry. Worrying did no good, she reminded herself again. If
>she was to be of any use in the rescue of Lucy, then she couldn't
afford to let her emotions free. She would not be Ellen, allowing
>irrational, near-panic to interfere with what needed to be done.

>Clark, of course, knew. He always did. She'd gotten so adept at
hiding such emotions from herself that sometimes he knew before she
>did.
>The taxi had let them out a little over two blocks from their
destination. They strolled at an unhurried pace along the broken
>sidewalk, apparently in no rush to reach their goal, but Lois
recognized the tilt of her husband's head.
>
"Hear anything?" she asked softly.
>
He shook his head. "The whole area's too noisy," he said. "We're
>going to have to get closer."
>The blast of a boat's horn underlined the statement. She saw Clark
wince slightly.

>
"How about the warehouse?" she asked. "Can you see anything?"

>
He lowered his glasses for a moment, then pushed them back into place.

>"No."

>"Lead lining? That's suspicious by itself."

>"Yeah, but considering who owns it, it doesn't have to be because of
the women. It could be anything they didn't want Superman to see.

>Lining a building with lead isn't a crime, you know."

>"I think the EPA or somebody would object," she said. "Paint isn't
supposed to have lead in it anymore."

>
"Well yes, I suppose. But it might not be paint." They strolled in

>silence for several minutes. When they approached the huge
structure, he guided her toward the right, into the space between the

>target warehouse and its neighbor. "Let's see what we can find
behind the building."

>
"Okay."

>
The ground between the two warehouses was littered with debris. Lois

>stepped carefully around bits of clutter, broken pieces of board,
aluminum cans and general trash. Apparently, whoever felt like

>dumping something regarded this area to be fair game, she thought. A
tricycle, minus its handlebars and one rear wheel, lay forlornly on

>its side near the rear corner. When they rounded the corner itself,
Clark pulled her quickly to one side to prevent her collision with a

>set of rusty bedsprings discarded on the ground and half-supported by
the building's wall, next to a trio of battered metal trash cans,

>their lids lying askew atop their warped and dented shapes.

Lois
made a face at the aroma wafting from the interior of the nearest can.

>
"There's a door over there." Clark's voice was barely audible. "I'm

>going to see if I can hear anything."

>"Okay." Lois took a deep breath. There was a tightening feeling
across her lower back, the feel of muscles bunching and contracting.

>It hurt. The pain radiated around her sides, cramping. It lasted
for only a few seconds, but she knew what it was.

>
She held her breath, glancing quickly at her watch. Only twenty

>minutes since the last one.

>It wasn't supposed to happen this way! They had told her in the
childbirth classes that the early stages of labor took hours for a

>first baby!

>Clark was pressing his ear against the door, a look of concentration
on his features.

>
"What do you hear?" she whispered.

>
"Five heartbeats," he replied, also in a whisper. "And someone's

>crying. A woman...more than one woman. I think this is..."

>Whatever he was going to say, she never learned. From behind them
came a yell and a tremendous crash, the jangling of what could only
>be the bedsprings, and the metallic thunder of the trash cans, as a
falling body catapulted into them.
>
Lois turned.
>
Ralph lay face down on the cement among the fallen cans and scattered
>garbage. One of his feet was tangled in the discarded bedsprings.
They rattled loudly as he struggled to free himself from their grasp.
>He couldn't make more noise if he was trying to do so, she thought
with a flash of sheer exasperation for her awkward colleague's
>blundering ways.

>The door flew open, striking Clark square in the face and Lois found
herself staring in shock down the barrel of the biggest handgun she
>thought she had ever seen.

>"Hold it," the man said. "Don't anybody move."

>*****

>"Inside," the larger of the two men said. He gave Ralph a jab with
the nose of his weapon. "You, too, twinkletoes."

>
Inside the warehouse, it smelled damp and musty. Lights, high above
>on the ceiling, illuminated shadowy piles of crates stacked at the
far end. Camouflage, she thought, in case someone should open the
>big front doors. Their footsteps echoed hollowly as the two men
herded them through the door and closed it behind them.

>
"What do we do with 'em?" the other man asked.
>
"Lock them in with the women."
>
"Why not just kill them?" the shorter man wanted to know. Beside

>her, Lois felt her husband tense.

>"Because I said so."

>"But, Joe..."

>"You heard me."

>"What are you going to do with us?" Ralph asked.

>"Shut up." Joe apparently wasn't the garrulous sort, Lois concluded.
"Hurry up, Ernie."
>
"Over there." Ernie waved his own weapon. Lois followed the gesture
>and gasped.

>Against one wall a big cage had been set up, complete with four cots
and nothing else. This crowd obviously had a good grasp of the
>villain's traditional role, she thought ironically. Concern for
their victims' comfort didn't seem to be exactly paramount on their
>list of priorities. Inside the cage, standing in complete silence
and watching the little drama, were three young women. The one
>closest to the bars was Lucy Lane. Her sister was staring at her in
obvious surprise and horror, but, strangely enough, she didn't make a
>sound.

>As they were herded toward the contraption, Clark kept an arm around
>her and his body between her and the weapons. Neither of the men
>objected; they probably didn't see her as much of a threat, Lois
>thought, and she had to concede the fact that in her present

>condition, they were probably right.
>Ralph was limping; he might have twisted his ankle when he fell over
>the bedspring, she speculated unsympathetically. If so, it served

>him right.

>Ernie waved his gun at the women. "Back up," he ordered and they
>obeyed silently, in fact their silence was beginning to strike Lois

>as distinctly odd. While Joe covered the three captives, Ernie
>unlocked the cage door. "Get in."

>>"You can't do this!" Ralph protested indignantly, only to be shoved

>unceremoniously forward by Ernie. Joe pointed his gun directly at
>Lois.

>>"Careful, pretty boy," he said to Clark.

>>Lois felt Clark's arm tighten. Without fuss, she followed Ralph into

>the cage. They were in a quandary, she knew. Clark could
>undoubtedly take these two out, but not in full view of the three

>woman and Ralph. Besides, there was always the possibility that one
>of the captives could get hurt.

>>He followed her into the cage, stepping over Ralph, who was picking

>himself up from the floor, and looked quickly at the women. "Are you
>three all right?"

>>"Quiet in there," Ernie said. "No talking."

>>"You can't do this," Ralph said again as he clambered awkwardly to

>his feet, and then sat down painfully on one of the cots.

>"Newsflash, Ralph," Clark said. "They just did." Lois could hear
>the barely suppressed anger in his voice and glanced up at him in

>surprise. Clark's jaw was set; he was definitely unhappy with the
>results of Ralph's blundering. Well, that was just too bad, she

>reflected. When they got out of here, Clark was going to have to
>wait in line. She planned on having first dibs on Ralph. If there

>was anything left when she finished, Clark could have his turn.

>"I said 'no talking'!" Ernie glowered at them. "Unless you want to
>die a little early!"

>>"Ernie!" Joe's voice was sharp. He turned to the prisoners. "Let

>me explain something," he said to Clark. "We have a way to be sure
>orders get obeyed. Did you notice the floor of the cage is made of

>metal? You see this?" He held up a small object in his left hand.
>"I push this button, the cage zaps anybody inside it. It won't kill

>you, but it doesn't feel good. You want me to give you a
>demonstration?"

>
Clark shook his head.
>
"Good." Joe turned and walked away from the cage. "Don't give me
a
>reason to use it."

>Lois stared at Clark in shock. They couldn't even talk?

>Clark put his finger to his lips and gestured to the cot next
to
them. "Sit down," he mouthed silently.
>
Lois nodded and obeyed. Her feet hurt and so did her back. At
least
>there had been no more contractions so far. She glanced at her
watch
and realized why. It had only been six minutes since the
last one,
>though it seemed much longer.

>The ringing of a cellular phone startled her and she glanced
quickly
around. Joe and Ernie were sitting on a pair of folding
chairs some
>twenty feet away, with what looked like a card table between
them.
Joe reached for the cell phone that lay on the table along
with a
>deck of cards, a couple of bags of chips and the remains of two
fast
food dinners.
>
"Hello?" he said and paused, listening. "Yeah, we're ready."
More
>silence. "An hour? Right. Uh, boss? We have a problem." Again,
he
paused. "Three snoopers. We caught 'em sneaking around out
>back." He fell silent for several seconds. "No, I didn't
think
you'd like it if we did it here...Right. Out to sea. That's
what I
>figured. Right. Okay. We're ready when you are." He switched
off
the phone.
>
Clark sat down next to Lois. "They plan on getting us out to sea
and
>dumping us there," he said, very softly. "Don't worry. I won't
let
it get that far."
>
She nodded. "Clark," she whispered, "those two are the guys who

>tried to kill the detective."

>He nodded, apparently unsurprised.

>Lucy had moved over to sit beside her, without a sound. The
other
two women were sitting on one of the other bunks. One of
them began
>to cry softly. Lois recognized Tanya Weiss by her picture.
Anita
Stewart's darker skin didn't show the traces of tears as
easily, but
>her eyes were reddened. Lucy had been crying, too, Lois
thought.
Her sister looked wan and frightened.
>
Clark kept his face turned toward Lois, away from the two
guards.
>"That was Brookes on the phone," he whispered. Lois had to strain
to
hear the words. "They're starting out to make the 'pickup'.
They
>should be here in an hour or less."

>She nodded infinitesimally. "We wait," she breathed. Surely,
she
thought, she could hold out until then. Early labor took
hours,
>didn't it?

>Silence fell as they waited, not wanting to risk the results of
being
overheard unless there was something important to
communicate. The
>silence was loud. She still hadn't had a contraction, she

thought
>hopefully, after what seemed like at least an hour had passed. Maybe
>it wasn't real labor after all. But what was keeping Brookes, Ashley
>and Griggs? She was beginning to wonder if the three grad students
>had encountered difficulty with their final "pickup".
>She glanced at her watch as she felt the telltale ache in her lower
>back again. Only fifteen minutes? For a moment she didn't believe
>her eyes. It couldn't be! Surely more time had gone by, but her
>watch informed her it hadn't. What was going on here? According to
>the childbirth classes and everything she had read, this wasn't
>right. Things shouldn't be progressing this fast!

>Or, at least, a human labor shouldn't.
>Clark was looking at her questioningly. "Lois?"
>"I'm all right, Clark," she said.
>It was true. The contraction wasn't that difficult to control. If
>it got no worse, she could handle it, she assured herself. There was
>no need to alarm Clark with the information. He already had enough
>to deal with, and she didn't want fear for her safety to make him
>careless. And there was no point in telling their captors. The idea
>had crossed her mind, only to be instantly dismissed. If they were
>willing to cold-bloodedly murder three human beings, one of them a
>pregnant woman, not to mention Detective Brett, two nights ago, why
>should the fact that she was in labor make any difference at all?
>The feeling lasted longer this time, and she bit her lip. An hour,
>she told herself. Only an hour, maybe less, and in the meantime
>Clark would be able to figure out a way for them to escape from this
>situation *without* revealing their big secret, they could catch the
>three grad students red-handed and rescue whatever unfortunate young
>woman the three had kidnapped. Surely, she could hold out for an hour.
>Clark seemed to accept her assurance, and indeed, the contraction was
>easing off, now.
>An hour, she reassured herself. Just an hour.

>*****
>Clark was worried. Lois shifted against him and for the fourth time
>in thirty-five minutes he felt the muscles of her abdomen contract.
>Each time, the interval between the contractions had been less, but
>she made no complaint. He glanced at his watch. The grad students
>should be getting here soon. He wished he could have gotten them out
>of here sooner, particularly for Lois's sake, but the thought had
>occurred to him that the group might have some sort of passwords or
>ritual to follow as a safety measure. If the trio called again
>before they arrived, he wanted nothing to prevent his

capture of the
>three men, or--particularly--his rescue of the last girl.
He
certainly hadn't planned it like this but Ralph's blundering
had
>forced his hand, so this was the way he was going to have to play
it
out.
>
Silently, he scanned the area with his better-than-human vision
until
>he found what he was looking for--the circuit-breaker panel on
the
opposite wall of the huge, half-empty structure, which
controlled the
>flow of electric power delivered to the warehouse.
He felt,
rather than heard Lois exhale suddenly and turned to see the

>perspiration standing out on her forehead.

>"Lois?"

>"I'm...okay," she breathed.

>"You're in labor," he whispered in sudden realization. "How
long?"

>"Under an hour. I'm okay," she repeated in a whisper. "Brookes
and
the others will be here soon. I can last."
>
Clark quelled the knot of panic that tried to surface. It was
their
>first baby and it had been less than an hour. They had some
time,
but he had to end this thing as soon as possible when the
three
>arrived with their captive. Lowering his glasses, he focussed
a
narrow beam of heat vision on the lock.
>
Lucy was regarding her sister, and her expression told Clark she
had
>realized what was in progress. He leaned toward his wife.

>"Lois, give me your shoe."

>Lois obeyed without question. Lucy gave him an odd look and
Ralph
whispered, "For God's sake, Kent! Now's not the time to
develop a
>foot fetish!"

>Clark ignored him. His super-hearing had detected the approach
of
footsteps. There were three knocks on the door, then two more.

>Eddie rose quickly to his feet and hurried to the door to open
it.

>As he fumbled with the lock, Lois gave a faint whimper.
Clark
glanced quickly at her to see her biting her lip, eyes
closed.
>Suddenly, she gasped.

>"Clark, I ...I think my water just broke!"

>The door of the warehouse opened. A young woman, bound and
gagged,
was pushed, struggling, through the aperture, followed by
the three
>grad students.

>"Hang on, Lois," Clark whispered. "I'm going to get you out
of
this." He gave her hand a firm squeeze, rose to his feet and
strode
>to the door. With a single motion, he cocked his arm and hurled
the
shoe directly between the cage bars, straight across the room.
It
>struck the breaker panel with a shower of sparks.

>The lights went out and the building was plunged into
darkness.

>

>Lois heard a startled scream from Lucy and a yell of panic from
Ralph. Sandwiched in between them and the shouts from the five men

>outside the cage, she heard the clang of the cage door being thrown
open. Clark was in action, she thought gratefully, then turned her

>attention to dealing with the contraction that was gripping her more
strongly every second.

>
This one was *much* worse than the previous ones. The thought

>crossed her mind for a split second, and then fled as she gave a
small cry of pain.

>
She felt a hand grasp hers. "Squeeze if you want to," her sister's

>voice said. "You can do it, Lois."

>Somehow, Lucy's voice helped her regain some control. She took a deep
breath and began the breathing pattern she had learned in childbirth

>classes. Lucy's voice encouraged her; it vaguely surprised her that
her sister could take over this way; in earlier times it had always

>been Lois in control of the situation and Lucy who followed.

>The cage quivered; she thought the heavy, retreating footsteps
belonged to Ralph, but she didn't really care. The contraction was

>beginning to ease; somewhere in the background, almost as if it was
in a different reality, she heard crashes and suddenly the sound of

>several gunshots and yells of both pain and panic. It didn't concern
her as she dealt with the more immediate problem.

>
Slowly, the pain receded. She took another, deeper breath and opened

>her eyes.

>It was still pitch dark, but the racket had quieted. Lucy's voice
said into the sudden silence, "Is it over?"

>
Lois wasn't sure what she was referring to, the contraction or the

>fight. "What?"

>"Can you move? We need to get out of..."

>"Lois, are you all right?" Clark's voice said out of the darkness,
and the beam of a penlight flashed over them.

>
"What happened?" Lucy asked.

>
Clark's hand slipped into Lois's for a moment. "It's all over. I'm

>going to call the police and the paramedics, then we can get you to
the hospital." She could see his face dimly in the darkness as he

>turned to her sister. "Stay with her, Lucy. I'll be back in a few
minutes. I've got to stop Ralph from bleeding all over the place,

>too." He sounded remarkably unsympathetic, for Clark. "Don't worry,
he'll be fine." Lois felt him squeeze her hand again, then he was

>gone.

>To her dismay, she felt the next contraction beginning to build.

It
figured, she thought. Lane and Kent never did anything the easy

>way...

>"Breathe, Lois," she heard Lucy say, and gave a strained half-chuckle.

>"What do *you* know about it?"

>"Just breathe," Lucy reiterated. "I coached a friend of mine through
this, last year. I can at least substitute until Clark gets back."
>

>
"Where are the paramedics?" Lucy was saying fifteen minutes later.
>"And the police?"

>Clark wasn't paying much attention to his sister-in-law and the other
three young women by this time. Lois's hand was squeezing his hard
>enough to cut off the circulation for an ordinary man.

>"Breathe," he repeated for about the hundredth time. "Come on,
honey, breathe!" He lifted his head at the sound of a distant siren.
>"They'll be here in a few minutes."

>It was a good thing, too, he thought. If he had dared to try to fly
Lois to the hospital he would have, but her labor was going fast.
>Maybe it had something to do with the fact that the baby was
half-Kryptonian, he reflected abstractedly. Or maybe it was simply
>one of the many different ways a labor could go. In any case, he
didn't quite have the courage to try to carry his wife any distance
>through the air right now unless it was a case of direst emergency.
If it came right down to it, he could deliver the baby. It wasn't as
>if Superman hadn't done it before, and in far more primitive
conditions than this. Only, none of those others had been Lois and
>*their* baby.

>Slowly her death-grip on his hand relaxed. "Clark, " she panted,
still trying to regain her breath. "I don't think they're going to
>make it in time." Almost at once, she tensed as another contraction
started to build and she began to pant.
>
He sneaked a quick peek over his glasses and gulped. She was right.
>First baby or not, if the paramedics didn't get here pretty soon, it
looked as if he was going to have to do the honors. The baby's head
>was beginning to descend, in spite of Lois's valiant efforts not to
help it along. She grabbed his hand and began to squeeze.

>
"I hear a siren!" one of the other women said.
>
Clark could hear it, too, but at the moment his attention was

>centered on his wife. He had expected her to yell at him sometime
during the process. He knew many women swore at their husbands in
>the later stages of labor; they had been warned to expect it by the
childbirth instructor, but, like everything else she did, Lois was
>focussing completely on what she was trying to accomplish. A

few
moments later he was barely aware of the commotion as one of the
>former captives let the police in, until a bright light flooded over
him and a familiar voice said, "Can you use some help, Kent?"

>
Clark glanced up. William Henderson stood there, carefully training
>his flashlight on the floor between them. The Inspector turned to
the young officer peering over his shoulder. "Evans, go get the

>first aid kit out of your squad car. And hurry!"
>"Thanks, Inspector," Clark said. "Lois, try to rest between the
contractions. I think we're almost there."
>
"You know how to do this?" Henderson asked.
>
"Yeah," Clark said. "Any chance of the paramedics getting here in time?"

>
"About another fifteen minutes," Henderson said. "There's a jam-up
>on the parkway. A tour bus sideswiped a pickup. We're trying to
clear a lane, but..." He broke off, seeming to realize that Clark

>wasn't really listening. "Need some light?"
>"Yeah, thanks." Clark didn't glance around. "Did you hear that, Lois?"

>She tensed as another contraction started to build. "Yeah!" she gasped.

>"It looks like we're going to have to do this ourselves. Lucy, can
you hold the light?"

>
"Sure." Lucy's voice sounded scared, but determined. The young

>officer was back with the first aid kit. He set it down on a
neighboring cot and opened it.

>
"Thanks, officer," Clark said, absently. "All right, Lois, on the

>next contraction, let's have a push..."

>*****

>"You did a good job, Mr. Kent," the paramedic was saying half an hour
later as Lois and the newest Kent were being wheeled carefully

>through the rear door of the warehouse toward the waiting ambulance.
>"Maybe you should have been a paramedic."

>
Clark chuckled. "I think I'll stick to reporting, thanks." He bent

>over his wife. "I'll meet you at the hospital, honey. There's
something I have to do."

>
"I'll see you in half an hour," she whispered. Clark kissed her

>gently, watching her eyes close. She was exhausted, he knew, but his
respect for her had never been higher than it was at this moment. He

>waited as she was loaded into the ambulance, and a moment later the
vehicle pulled away, lights flashing.

>
Henderson was beside him when he turned. "Congratulations, Clark."

>
"Thanks, Bill." He felt himself beginning to grin. "Do you need me

>for anything else?"

>"Not really. I think we've got most of the story. There is one thing--"

>"Yes?"

>"How do you and Lane manage to get into situations like this?"

>Clark shook his head and shrugged. "Inspector, if I ever find out,
you'll be the first to know."
>

>
Coming slowly awake, the first thing Lois noticed before she even
>opened her eyes was that she was sleeping on her back. Slowly, she
moved her hand to feel her abdomen. It was flat; she hadn't dreamed
>it, then. She and Clark had found Lucy, and Clark had helped to
deliver their baby.
>
Her hand was taken in a large, warm masculine one, and Clark's voice
>said, "Hi, honey."

>She opened her eyes. He was smiling down at her with an expression
in his own that made a lump form in her throat. He cupped her face
>with his other hand.

>"Do you know how much I love you?" he said.

>She cleared her throat. "Almost as much as I love you," she said.

>"Almost?"

>"Well, *as* much, then."

>"That's better." Correctly interpreting her glance around the room, he
smiled.
>
"I called Dr. Klein. He's doing the physical exam right now to be
>sure everything's okay, but he didn't look worried."

>She smiled. "That's a relief, after the way it turned out. What
happened to Lucy, by the way?"
>
He let go of her hand and seated himself in the chair next to her
>bed. "She and the other women went back to the station with
Inspector Henderson. She said to tell you she'll be by later to see
>you, with our moms and your dad. She's handling it pretty well."

>"Were they all right? The other ones?"

>He nodded. "Yeah. Tired, shaken up and in need of baths, but they
weren't physically hurt," he said.
>
"I'm glad of that." She hunted around to find the button that raised
>the head of her bed. "So what happened after I left? I want to know
the rest of the story!"
>
Clark's smile widened. "Now I know you're feeling okay," he said.
>
"You bet I am! Why don't you fill me in on everything? I really
>didn't get to see much of the end, you know."

>"Yes, I *did* notice you were otherwise occupied," he said. "Where
shall I start?"
>
"What happened after you put out the lights?"
>
Clark lowered his voice. "After the lights went out, I knocked them
>all out. I could see well enough in the dark and they couldn't. But
I was careful to move at close to normal speed, just in case."
>
"I heard gunshots, or I think I did."

>
"Yeah. A couple of them panicked and started shooting. That's when

>Ralph got shot."

>"Ralph got *shot*?"

>"Yeah. He'll be okay, though."

>"Darn," Lois said.

>"Why?"

>"If someone shot him, then I won't be able to kill him,"

she
explained. "At least until he gets well."

>
Clark chuckled. "I wouldn't worry. He's not likely to forget what

>happened for quite awhile. At least when he tries to sit down."

>"You're kidding!"

>"Nope."

>Lois giggled. "And then?"

>"After that I tied them all up with their own belts, and after I
checked on you I patched Ralph up, phoned 911, and went back to help

>you. After you left in the ambulance, I made one little side trip,
then came right here. You were asleep, so I phoned Dad--I'm going to

>pick him up later this evening--and then Mom to let her know what had
happened, and Perry. I'll get to the rest of our friends after I get

>home."

>"So the case is all tied up in a package?" she asked. "How about
that ship that was waiting for the 'delivery'?"

>
Clark chuckled. "Funny thing about that. Somehow, it strayed inside

>the three mile limit and the Coast Guard just happened to be waiting
for them and picked them up. It must have been a freak ocean current

>or something."

>"I think that ocean current might have had a little 'super' help,"
Lois said. "Did they find anything incriminating?"

>
"Quite a bit, actually," Clark told her. "We'll know more by tomorrow."

>
"I hope so. You can bet Caribbean Imports is going to claim they

>knew nothing about it, again."

>"Naturally." Clark nodded his agreement. "But we know differently.
Superman overheard Jeffers talking about it, and Jeffers is an

>officer of the company. After you get back from maternity leave,
we're going to have a lot of investigating to do."

>
"It can't wait for that," Lois said. "You've got to start on it

>right away. Jimmy can help, and so can I, from home. There's still
the other missing girls, and..."

>
"We will," Clark said, "but you can at least take the night off."

>
She lay back against the pillow and gave a little laugh. "You're

>right. I just don't want them to get away with it again."

>"If we have anything to say about it, they won't," Clark said. "But
right now, I think we've got visitors."

>
On cue, there was a knock on the door. Perry White, carrying a

>bouquet of flowers in one hand and with a wide grin on his face,
stood in the doorway. Behind him, Jimmy was holding the most
>enormous stuffed bear Lois had ever seen.

>"Hi, Chief," Clark said. "Come on in."

>"Where's the newest Kent?" Perry asked. "Here, honey, these are for you."

>Lois took the flowers and sniffed. "Chief, they're beautiful!"

>"From Alice, Jimmy and me," Perry said.

>"The baby's next door," Clark told him. "As soon as the doctor
finishes, you'll get to meet--" He stopped and grinned.
>
"Aw, come on, CK," Jimmy said. He turned to Lois. "He told us you'd
>had the baby, but he wouldn't tell us what it was!"

>"Clark!" Lois said.

>Clark laughed out loud. "You'll find out in a minute, Jim," he said.
He nodded toward the door. "The doctor must be done. Here comes the
>nurse, now."

>Perry and Jimmy turned as a young woman in a pink uniform wheeled a
transparent bassinet into the room. She checked the band on Lois's
>wrist against the one on the baby's ankle and smiled. "Here you are,
Mrs. Kent."
>
"Thank you," Lois said.
>
"Do you need any help?" she asked.
>
"If I do, I'll ask," Lois told her.
>
"All right, then." She glanced at Clark. "You must be Mr. Kent.
>The story of how you delivered the baby is all over the hospital.
You're a celebrity!"
>
Clark smiled at her. "I just did what I had to."
>
"Well, we all think it was wonderful. Congratulations to both of
>you." She smiled at Lois. "This one's a keeper, honey. Hang onto
him."
>
"Thanks," Lois said. "I plan to."
>
"You delivered the baby?" Jimmy asked incredulously, as the woman departed.
>
"I'll tell you about it later, Jim," Clark said. He reached forward
>to lift the small, drowsy bundle out of the bassinet and place it in
its mother's arms. "Perry and Jimmy, say hello to Marta Elaine Kent."
>

>
"I don't know what we're going to do with all these flowers," Lois
>said. She was carefully dressing their new daughter in preparation
for going home. Clark could see what she meant. The room was decked
>in flower arrangements reminiscent of the Daily Planet the day after
she'd made her debut as Ultra Woman. Idly, he picked up one of the
>accompanying cards.

>"Mayor Thompkins. That was nice of him."

>"Yeah. Henderson and his guys sent one, too."

>"Which one?"

>"The daisies and whatever--over there by the one from the President."

>Clark raised his eyebrows. "President Garner?" Curious, he began
checking the names. "Huh! LNN...the Herald...the Star? Here's the
>one from the Planet, of course...the Governor...the District
Attorney...I guess this one wants to stay on your good side. Mom and
>Dad, your parents...Lucy, Anita, Tanya and Maria?"

>"Can you believe it? It arrived this morning. It was really sweet of
them."
>
"Yes, it was. Let's see...The Tanzanikan Embassy?" He opened the

>card bearing the crest of the Royal House of Tanzanika. "How about
that! Signed by Bobbo and his new bride."
>
"Yes. That arrived this morning, along with a telegram of

>congratulations. And Bobbo's hinting strongly that he wants to apply
for position of godfather to Marta."
>
He raised his brows. "Well, I don't mind. Do you?"
>
"It won't make her some kind of royalty or something, will it?"

>
Clark grinned. "I don't think so."
>
"Good. One in the family is plenty, My Lord Kal-El."

>
"Don't remind me." He glanced around the room. "Do you want to keep
>all these?"

>"Only the ones from our parents, the girls, Perry and Bobbo. Don't
lose the cards, though."
>
"I won't. I've got an idea." He swept around the room, collecting
>the flower arrangements, vanished and returned within seconds.
"There, all done." He handed her a neat stack of cards.

>
"What did you do with them?"
>
"I gave them to the volunteers to distribute to patients without any.
>Be right back." In a flash, he and the rest of the flowers vanished,
then he reappeared. "All set."
>
"I knew there were advantages being married to you," she said. "I
>think I'll keep you around for awhile."

>He smiled. "I hope so." The smile faded and he came to stand by
her, looking down at his new daughter. "You know, this is a day I'd
>never have believed possible less than a year ago." He reached out
to stroke the fine, dark hair on the baby's head with one large
>finger. "She's beautiful. Almost as beautiful as her mother."

>"She has your eyes," Lois said.

>"And your nose," he countered. "And if she's anything like you,
she'll run her big brother ragged."
>
"It'll keep him on his toes," Lois said. "Just give her a year."

>
Clark grinned. "Or less." He glanced around the room one last time.
>"I think we've got everything. Let me take your bag to the car and

>I'll let them know we're ready to leave. You're all checked out
and
the bill's paid. I can't wait to get the two of you home."

>

>Epilogue

>
Jeremiah P. Jeffers sat in his office, glaring at his computer

>screen. He hadn't read the information displayed there for
his
edification; in fact, he had a strong urge to take the large,

>crystal paperweight resting on the corner of his desk and hurl
it
through that same monitor screen.

>
He had just finished a very uncomfortable interview with two

>expressionlessly courteous government officials. The men had asked
a
great many awkward questions about the connection of the company
with

>a certain cargo ship which had been apprehended by the Coast
Guard
two and a half miles off of Hobbs Bay, and about the
presence of five

>female captives aboard the ship, young women reported missing
from
the institutions of higher learning which they attended, as
well as

>the four found in the warehouse belonging to Caribbean Imports
on
Pier Twenty-four, here in Metropolis, by the reporting team of
Lane

>and Kent.

>He glared at the headlines that shouted at him from the front page
of
the Daily Planet which lay on the desk's polished surface, and
at the

>byline of Lane and Kent. The articles below those headlines
reported
in great detail the series of disappearances of young
women from NTSU

>and the capture last night of the kidnappers; two of the five
were
also charged with the attempted murder of a police detective
who was

>recovering from her stab wound at a local hospital.

Extensive
international investigations were being launched in
connection with

>the cargo ship, Caribbean Lady, and a possible connection was
being
considered with a reported white slavery ring operating in
several

>foreign countries...

>Jeffers picked up the newspaper and hurled it across the room.

>Lane and Kent had interfered with the operations of his
company
before, and damaged his record of success with his
superiors, but

>this was the final straw. They had crossed an invisible line
this
time. They would have to be dealt with.

>
Jeffers picked up the telephone on his desk and dialed an
outside

>line. On the third ring, someone picked it up.

>"This is Jeffers," he began. "Sir, we need to address an
ongoing
business problem..."

>

>
The End

>
The next part of this series is "Charade".

End
file.